

Suffering: A Heavenward Lament and a Confident Victory

1 Introduction

When you are suffering, what is your main desire? What do you want the most?

Most would say something like, “To have the suffering go away.”

And therein lies the problem. For most people, their goal is to be comfortable, happy, and carefree.

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Suffering gets in the way of that. We are on the highway of happiness and we hit the brick wall of suffering and everything comes to a dead stop.

What we are going to learn in this study is that removing the suffering or understanding the suffering is not the most important, although they are not unimportant. The most important is how we think about suffering and how we respond to it.

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Suffering can have many faces:

- Betrayal
- Being cheated
- Loneliness
- Loss of reputation
- Loss of health
- Loss of finances
- Loss of relationships
- Divorce
- Abuse
- Death
- Persecution

When we suffer, it becomes the center of our lives.

Don't you wish that when you are suffering that you can just say, “I believe that I've learned what I am supposed to from this trial, from this suffering. I've become the person that it has pushed me towards.” And thus, having accomplished its purpose, the suffering goes away.

But that is not how it works. Suffering and grief often do eventually go away. But many times, grief will linger like a brick in our chest for years, maybe even for a lifetime.

Suffering and grief can come at us from all angles. It can be relentless and take over our thoughts, our motives, our physical abilities, our lives. Many times, it hits us just when things are going well.

Here are perhaps the three biggest moments in Jesus' earthly ministry where He was celebrated and proclaimed for who He really was.

- 1) Jesus' baptism
- 2) The Mount of Transfiguration
- 3) His triumphant entry into Jerusalem

What do they all have in common?

Jesus' baptism was the start of His ministry. It is when He stopped being a craftsman and, at age 30, began His ministry as priest and prophet. This is when after John the Baptist had baptized Jesus that the Holy Spirit as a dove descended upon Jesus and the Father said from the heavens, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." A dramatic affirmation of who Jesus was. The Trinity came together. A tremendously powerful moment. Surely a watershed event in Jesus' life. The very next verse in Matthew starts with "Then." Then what?

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"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." A public display of Jesus as Lord supported by the Trinity followed by isolation in the desert with only the companionship of the Devil and his temptations. A swift turn of events. A high moment quickly followed by a trial.

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At the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus went up to a high mountain with Peter, James, and John. Jesus was transfigured before them, His face shone like the sun. God the Father thundered, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!" This was an earthly glimpse into Jesus' true self, His glory and radiance as God. When they came down from the mountain, that glory high did not last long.

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They were confronted by a demon possessed boy. They were quickly slapped in the face with the miseries and trials of this world. It's like getting a professional body massage and coming out of the building all relaxed and peaceful and tripping on the sidewalk and landing on your face.

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On a Sunday, Jesus was at the peak of His earthly ministry. The crowds were cheering Him on and laying down palm branches and cloaks as He entered Jerusalem while riding on a donkey. They were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, indeed, the King of Israel!"

Palm branches in Israeli history symbolized victory, deliverance, God's protection over His people, and glory. The palm branch showed up on Jewish coins, synagogues, tombs, and menorahs. They were used to welcome kings who were victorious. By laying down palm branches as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the people were hailing Him as their victorious king.

This was a foreshadow of Revelation 7:9-10 where Jesus is portrayed as King and Savior:

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

**“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”**

They were also laying down their cloaks. The people back then, did not have an entire wardrobe of clothes. A person's cloak was an important part of them. By laying down their cloaks before Jesus they were showing submission and paying homage to Him.

They were shouting “Hosanna” which means “Pray or I beg you, save us.”

So that Sunday, Jesus was on top of the world. The crowds were cheering and calling Him king.

On that following Thursday, Jesus was arrested by the Sanhedrin and taken to the High Priest Caiaphas.

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On Friday, He was crucified. His peak moment did not last very long. What? About four days. Cheered by the crowd as king one day; murdered by the crowd as a criminal a few days later.

How often do our lives follow that same trajectory?

We are feeling good, things finally seem to be going our way and, bam, we get hit with a cancer diagnosis. Our world spins out of control. The floor of our lives just fell out. One day we are in the palace and the next day we are in the gutter.

When we are suffering, we wonder, “How much might God expect me to bear?” “What if I reach my breaking point and God is not there?” “How much can I count on God when my life is being crushed out of me?” Those are all legitimate questions which we will examine as we go through this study.

Understand, there is no inherent nobility in suffering. Sometimes the suffering is constant and unending. And sometimes, the suffering follows us or even takes us to our grave.

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But realize this. We are not a people of hopelessness. We are not a people of despair.

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We are people of resurrection. When it looks like hope has been crushed and everything is bleak. When the grain of wheat falls into dry, rocky soil. When the righteous man is in prison, forgotten. Then there is resurrection. The stone was rolled away from the tomb's entrance. Light shone into the tomb. And out stepped someone more alive than before. The grave clothes left behind. That is our hope, our assurance. A sprout breaks through the soil. The prisoner hears the door unlock. Out of death comes life more glorious. Our trials are not our grave. Rather, our trials are more like a womb out of which comes a stronger new birth. A stronger new you. We may be twisted and bent, but out of that we come with a

new shape. We are not children of death. We are children of resurrection. We have hope, a firm and assured hope.

Notice what happens in Romans 5:2-4

through whom [Jesus Christ] we also have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we celebrate in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also celebrate in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope;

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We start with hope (“we celebrate in the hope...”). This is a hope based not in our wealth or our power, but in the “glory of God.” But while we are celebrating this hope there comes tribulations. These lead to perseverance which leads to proven character and that brings us back to hope. No matter where we are in that process, hope is always nearby. It is our foundation and starting point and it is also our end point.

But what if we feel like we are losing hope? When our faith is being ground down by our pain?

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Optimism says “Don’t worry, it probably won’t happen.” Hope says, “It may happen, but God will keep us.”

Every point in our lives is filled with hope because every point in our lives is filled with God. They are bound together.

We do not live as those with no hope.

In this study, we are going to look at where to go when we are in darkness. Not only what to do, but how we should think. We will be the ones spoken of in Song of Solomon 8:5, **“Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?”**

2 Topics

These are the topics that we will study.

- 1) Biblical truths about suffering
- 2) Why is there evil and why do we suffer?
- 3) What are the sources of suffering
- 4) Wrong thinking about suffering both Christian and non-Christian
- 5) Suffering gives us two choices
- 6) Jesus can relate to our pain because He has experienced it Himself
- 7) How should we respond to our own suffering
- 8) How should we respond to other people’s suffering
- 9) Biblical people who suffered and how they responded
- 10) The Book of Lamentations

The first few topics are more theological in nature. This is because in order to think and respond properly to suffering, we must have a solid foundation of its spiritual causes and effects. If we do not

think correctly about what suffering is, then we will have a tendency to blame God or even exclude God from the equation.

The Bible is not a list of sound bites to laminate on a card that we can pull out and glance at when we are in pain. Rather, the Bible gives us stories, it gives us people, it tells us about things supernatural so that we can better understand the natural.

The Bible does not give us a glass of water to temporarily quench our thirst. It gives us an ocean of knowledge so that we can more than endure. So that we can triumph.

Let's dig in.

3 Biblical Truths about Suffering

We are going to look at each of these more in depth throughout the study.

3.1 Suffering in the world/universe started with rebellion

There was the initial rebellion of Satan and his angels.

Then there was the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Once sin entered the world, it corrupted everything and everyone. There is only one who is untainted by sin and that is God.

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We live in a world that is damaged and twisted and broken. There is nothing in this world that we can turn to that will free us from the corruption of sin because everything is just as corrupted. This is a core concept. We must understand this. If we do not get this, then when we do suffer, our tendency will be to blame God rather than to trust in Him.

3.2 Those who deserve judgment, apart from mercy, will suffer but so will the innocent

Proverbs 11: 21, **"Be assured, the evil person will not go unpunished..."**

It is estimated that the word "justice" appears over 140 times in the Bible. God is just. We have an innate sense that people who get away with evil in this life will pay the price in the next life.

But the universal corruption of sin taints everything. That means that it is not just the wicked who suffer from their sin. The "innocent" do also.

Luke 13:4, **"Or do you think that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse offenders than all the other people who live in Jerusalem?"**

The tower did not fall on and kill the 18 because they were being punished for their sin. The tower fell, and they happened to be under it.

Hurricanes, fires, tornadoes, earthquakes destroy the good and the bad. Drug houses and churches will both be crushed.

- Pastors are murdered just for preaching the Gospel
- People are unjustly slandered because someone is in a bad mood.

- Houses are robbed. Our church bookstore has been robbed at least three times.

The corruption of sin brings suffering onto everyone.

3.3 God does whatever He pleases

Consider this passage in **Isaiah 46:9-10**

**9 Remember the former things long past,
For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me,
10 Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, 'My plan will be established,
And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'**

Key, "My plan WILL be established." God is not like an optimistic or arrogant businessman/Politician/Athlete who predicts that he will be successful and win but could, just as easily lose. When God says something, it WILL happen. He reigns in the heavens. He is the King over all the earth.

Consider **Job 34:14-15**

**14 If He were to determine to do so,
If He were to gather His spirit and His breath to Himself,
15 Humanity would perish together,
And mankind would return to dust.**

You see what that verse says? It is God that holds all things together. If He should withdrawal from any part of the universe whether big, small, or in its entirety, that part would completely cease to exist. So can God do whatever His wants? Absolutely.

Also, **Psalm 115:3**

But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

The context of Psalm 115 is interesting. It is talking about how we create idols that really can't do anything, but we trust in them anyway. At that time the idols were statues that people prayed to. What is it today? What do we build that we trust in to make our lives better but, in reality, do nothing? Think about that. Do you have any idols in your own life?

A vital key to persevere through suffering is knowing that God is sovereign.

3.4 God is aware of our personal suffering and He cares

What nation of people have suffered like the Israelites in Egypt? They were afflicted with hard labor. The word "afflicted" means to "depress," to "oppress," to "humble." Notice that word in **Exodus 1:14, "all their labors which they violently had them perform as slaves."** They just did not work hard in a tough job; they were slaves. They broke and carried rocks, lifted them into place, and sealed them with mortar. Day after day after day. Then the king of Egypt was afraid that the Israelites would become too strong and rebel so he ordered the Hebrew boys to be murdered. This was a violently difficult life.

But notice Exodus 4:31

So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, they bowed low and worshiped.

Notice how the Israelites' reaction is so different than what most people would do. When most people realize that God is aware of their suffering they would say, "So then, God, why don't You do something about it?" But the Israelites had the opposite reaction, they bowed low and worshipped.

When we are in the midst of trials and it does not appear that God is doing anything, we are tempted to think that God has forgotten about us or that He just does not care.

We echo David in Psalm 13:1, **"How long, Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?"**

But we need to be confident that God is aware and has plans.

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Notice the order in Exodus 4:31:

God made a promise (this is implied) >
The people believed >
They knew that God was concerned >
God had seen their affliction >
They bowed low and worshipped

Shouldn't this be how we also respond in a time of trial? We should follow the same steps. It starts with knowing and believing God's promises and ends with our worship.

In 1 Samuel chapters 1-3, Israel was in a bad way.

- Eli was the high priest. 1 Samuel 2: 12 says, **"Now the sons of Eli were useless men; they did not know the Lord."**
- The people's sacrifices to God were being misused.
- Israel was at war with the Philistines.

Israel's spiritual life was in a shambles and it was at war.

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Meanwhile, Hannah dedicated her son, Samuel, to the Lord when he was three years old. It was not until nine years later when Samuel was twelve that he was called as a prophet. For those nine years, Israel did not see anything of promise or hope happening. There is no record of God contacting them. Yet, in the background, God had a plan and was preparing a deliverer, Samuel. And in the right time, God brought His plan to light. Though Israel may have thought that God had abandoned them, all along, He was aware of their suffering and was working His plan.

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Our lives can look like the back of a needlepoint. It is messy. Things are going every which way. And none of it makes any sense. It looks like our lives are just one big chaos.

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But what we don't know, is that God is, unseen to us, weaving those chaotic lines into something beautiful. Or, in this case, a can of Mountain Dew.

When we are suffering, we want immediate results. We want the trial to end and all to be love and peace again. But usually that does not happen. We pray, and we are still in the trial. We pray some more, and we are still in the trial. We get others to pray, and we are still in the trial. But we do not know what God is doing behind the scenes. Perhaps He is preparing a Samuel for us. Or He is preparing something else. But we have to wait.

Our suffering brings grief and sorrow to God. He hates the consequences of what sin has wrought. We see this over and over in Scripture. But the greatest proof is that God Himself came into our world. Why? To give us an example? No. To see what it is like to live down here in these circumstances? No. Psalm 102:19-20 perfectly answers this question.

**19 For He [God] looked down from His holy height; from heaven the Lord looked upon the earth,
20 To hear the groaning of the prisoner, to set free those who were doomed to death,**

This is the answer. God came to the earth. He was beaten, whipped, and murdered so that He could set us free from the consequences and horror of sin. Christ came to set things right because this is all wrong. Salvation, Redemption, Renewal, Deliverance: God is taking us from something that is wrong and bringing us to something that is glorious.

Out of Jesus' 33 miracles, how many involved healing? 26. That is 79%. He had compassion on the blind, the lepers, the dead. Jesus could have validated His ministry through all kinds of dramatic miracles.

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He could have lifted mountains off the ground and moved them ten miles. He could have made the sky turn different colors.

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But, instead, He was stopped by a dirty blind man on the side of a road because that man was hurting. That is the miracle that God did. Why? Because He is a God of compassion.

You cannot read the Bible and not see a God who cares. He shared our pain, our loneliness, our death.

The Bible does not just record Jesus' words, blurbs to live by. Rather, the Bible gives us Jesus' life because God's primary goal is not to tell us how to live with snippets of wisdom. God's primary goal is to bring us to Jesus.

If we do not believe this, if we do not know that God cares, then we have no meaning, no redemption from suffering. We might as well live by "Eat and drink for tomorrow we die."

3.5 God is our only true and final relief from suffering both now and in the future

1 Corinthians 15:55-57

55 Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law; 57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ has conquered death. He took on the curse and Judgment of sin and won. But notice what this means. "Who gives us the victory..." We have victory over death. We have victory over the curse and judgment of sin. This is because we are in Christ and Christ is the conquering victor.

What is the conclusion of this passage?

58 Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be firm, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

What are we firm against? What are we immovable against? Against trials. Against doubt. Against lies. Against the corruption of sin.

Because Jesus Christ has won the victory, we can be firm. We can be immovable. We can excel. Yes, you can excel. You may think of yourself as plain, typical, just another average person on the street. But God says that you can excel. Think about that.

Hebrews 7:24-25

24 Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. 25 Therefore He is also able to save forever those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Because Jesus Christ currently reigns on high, He is able to strengthen us, comfort us, motivate us, and encourage us. He lives to make intercession for us. We are not alone in our efforts to make it through our suffering.

Yes, the world does have its methods to overcome some sins. You can beat addiction to cigarettes and drugs using worldly systems. But only God not gives us the power to beat these sins, He takes us beyond that and gives us joy and hope, also.

3.6 Suffering and relief can be used by God to bring people to Himself

In John 11, we read about how Martha and Mary's brother Lazarus was sick and then he died. Jesus waited several days and then He and the disciples went to Bethany where Lazarus had been buried. After Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days, Jesus raised him from the dead. One side note, why might Jesus have waited three days? The Jews believed that the soul remained in the body for three days after death. By waiting four days, the people there would have felt that Lazarus was truly and absolutely dead and that even his soul was departed. Therefore, his resurrection was even more of a miracle.

But we see in John 12:9-12 that one of the consequences of Lazarus dying and Jesus raising him from the dead was that Lazarus' resurrection might bring people to God.

9 The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not on account of Jesus only, but so that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. 10 But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.

We see in verse nine that many people were coming to where Jesus was and one of the main reasons was because they wanted to see Lazarus. This does not mean that Lazarus was merely a prop. Jesus did feel compassion for him and for his family. But Lazarus will die again. However, that might have been, for many of those people, their one and only chance to see and hear from Jesus: the fountain of living waters.

We also read in verse 11 that because of Lazarus, many people were believing in Jesus. How many times do we know someone or hear about someone who is rejoicing even in the midst of trials and how great a witness that is to those around them? There is the person in the hospital bed who is cheerful. The person who lost their home and is trusting in God. This does not mean that we should put on a fake smile and act phony. But, because of the grace and hope of God, we can “consider it all joy... when you encounter various trials...”

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Paul Alexander contracted polio when he was six. He set the Guinness World Record for living the longest time in an iron lung: 72 years. He had a deep faith in Jesus Christ. On his iron lung he had a cross with the words “For God so loved the world.” He spoke often of how deeply his parents loved him which reminded him of God’s love. His friends said that he was a joyful person and that his energy was so vibrant that it was contagious. He loved life and knew how to enjoy it fully. He wrote a book and had a blog. Someone said, “Paul himself really loved inspiring people and letting them know that they are capable of great things.” People would come to see Paul and find Jesus Christ.

This is not to conclude that God causes suffering simply to draw us to Himself, but that God uses suffering to draw us to Himself.

Some say that there are five Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and you. And for most of the world, the only Gospel that they will ever read is you.

4 Why is there evil and why do we suffer?

The Bible’s explanation of evil and suffering starts in the books of Ezekiel and Genesis.

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There were two rebellions:

- 1) Satan and the angels
- 2) Mankind starting with Adam and Eve

Everything is scarred and corrupted by these falls. Only God remained unscathed.

Let’s look at each one in kind.

4.1 Satan and the angels

Revelation 12:3-4b

3 Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven crowns. 4 And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and hurled them to the earth.

In this allegorical passage, the “great red dragon” is Satan. The “stars” are a metaphor for angels. This passage is often interpreted that when Satan rebelled, he enticed a third of the angels to join him in his rebellion against God.

Some of those fallen angels are free to roam the earth as demons. We see Jesus interacting with them many times.

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- Demons possess people. Matthew 8:16, “Now when evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill.”
- Demons deceive with false doctrine. 1 Timothy 4:1, “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons...”
- Demons perform wicked signs to gain followers. Revelation 16:14, “for they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the entire world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty.”

The rest of the fallen angels were imprisoned in the abyss.

2 Peter 2:4, “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, held for judgment...”

Jude 6, “And angels who did not keep their own domain but abandoned their proper dwelling place, these He has kept in eternal restraints under darkness for the judgment of the great day...” Some think that these demons are the ones mentioned in Genesis 6:1-4 who had relations with mortal women and because of this particularly heinous sin, were imprisoned.

But why did Satan rebel? And perhaps more important, why do we care why? It is important to know why Satan rebelled because that shows the heart of sin and it shows Satan’s attitude and tactics which have not changed over the millennia. By knowing this, we can be aware of how our own thinking might be affected because this is the core of sin.

For this, we go to Ezekiel 28:12b-17 which most scholars believe is a description of Satan’s fall.

**“You [Satan] had the seal of perfection,
Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.**

Here we see that God created Satan, who at that time was called the Morning Star, as the model of perfection. God did not create evil. Nor do we see in the Bible a co-creation of good and evil. God only creates good.

**13 You were in Eden, the garden of God;
Every precious stone was your covering:
The ruby, the topaz and the diamond;
The beryl, the onyx and the jasper;
The lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald;
And the gold, the workmanship of your settings and sockets, was in you.
On the day that you were created they were prepared.
14 You were the anointed cherub who covers,**

Satan was particularly beautiful. Precious stones were his covering. We like to portray Satan as ugly and scary, but the truth is that he was probably the most beautiful of all of God's creations and may very well still be. Sin entices us because we find it attractive. If it was repulsive, then we would have no problem resisting it.

The cherubim were the beings closest to God and had direct access to Him. They were the ones who guarded God's holiness. And Satan may have been the closest one to God of them all.

**And I placed you there.
You were on the holy mountain of God;
You walked in the midst of the stones of fire.
15 You were blameless in your ways
From the day you were created
Until unrighteousness was found in you.**

Sin came from within Satan. It was not by external forces. It did not originate with God.

**16 By the abundance of your trade
You were internally filled with violence,
And you sinned;
Therefore I have cast you as profane
From the mountain of God.
And I have destroyed you, you covering cherub,
From the midst of the stones of fire.
17 Your heart was haughty because of your beauty;
You corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor.**

Satan fell because he thought too highly of himself. He became proud because he thought of himself as too beautiful, as too splendid.

We, too, have this same tendency. That is why God had Jeremiah write this in chapter 9:23-24

23 This is what the Lord says: "Let no wise man boast of his wisdom, nor let the mighty man boast of his might, nor a rich man boast of his riches; 24 but let the one who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises mercy, justice, and righteousness on the earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord.

Check out this contrast.

Here are some quotes from famous people.

- "I am the best and no one can match my skills."
- "Nobody's ever been more successful than me."
- "I understand money better than anybody."
- "I have accomplished more in my life than anyone else ever could."
- "I will always come out on top, because I am simply the best."
- "I am a force to be reckoned with, and no one can bring me down."
- "The world revolves around me; I am the center of attention."

Sadly, I could go on.

Contrast those quotes to these.

- "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."
- "To God be the glory, great things He has done."
- "When we look for success, it should be for the sole purpose of boasting sincerely in Christ."
- "Our voices, our service, and our abilities are to be employed, primarily, for the glory of God."
- "It is a great and glorious truth that we humans were made for the glory of God. To experience and express all the wonders of his manifold attributes is the delightful vocation of his people."

Which of those two types of people do you think are the ones with the most peace, the most contentment, the most joy?

B.F. Skinner wrote this in his diary. Notice how pleasantly it begins but how it ends.

"Sun streams into our living room. My hi-fi is midway through the first act of Tristan and Isolde. A very pleasant environment. A man would be a fool not to enjoy himself in it. In a moment I will work on a manuscript which may help mankind. So my life is not only pleasant; it is earned or deserved. And yet, yet, I am unhappy."

Now read Habakkuk 3:17-19. Notice how unpleasant it begins but how it ends.

**¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom
And there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail
And the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold
And there be no cattle in the stalls,
¹⁸ Yet I will exult in the LORD,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ The Lord GOD is my strength,
And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,
And makes me walk on my high places.**

Remember this, Proud people are full of themselves, humble people are full of God.

I threw you to the ground;

I put you before kings,
That they may see you.

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Satan's fall comes in four stages.

- 1) After Satan's initial sin that we see here, he was cast away from his place in heaven at God's throne. However, he still had access to God. We see this in Job 1:6-12.
- 2) In the book of Revelation during the Tribulation, Satan was cast from heaven and restricted to the Earth (Revelation 12:7-13).
- 3) At the beginning of the 1,000-year Millennium, Satan will be cast into a bottomless pit (Revelation 20:1-3).
- 4) After the Millennium, Satan will be briefly released but then after he is defeated, he will be cast into the Lake of Fire for forever (Revelation 20:10).

In Isaiah 14:12-15 we see the details of Satan's thought process.

**How you have fallen from heaven,
You star of the morning, son of the dawn!
You have been cut down to the earth,
You who defeated the nations!
13 But you said in your heart,
'I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
And I will sit on the mount of assembly
In the recesses of the north.
14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.'
15 Nevertheless you will be brought down to Sheol,
To the recesses of the pit.**

In verses 13-14 we see the five I will's. Notice how these five sinful attitudes still dominate today but in different forms.

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- 1) I will ascend to heaven

Satan as God's anointed cherub, was probably the angel closest to God. But notice that Satan uses the word "ascend." He was not satisfied to be the angel just below God. He wanted to be next to God. He wanted more praise, more glory, more recognition. He saw the adoration that God received and it was not enough for Satan to be glad in seeing someone else be praised. He wanted the same for himself.

That is why God tells us in Romans 12:15 to "**Rejoice with those who rejoice**" because our tendency is to tear down those who rejoice.

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- 2) I will raise my throne above the stars of God

In Scripture, angels are sometimes referred to as stars.

Revelation 1:20

As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Satan wanted to be the ruler of the angels. Notice the reference to “throne.” It was not enough for Satan to be the top angel; he wanted to be the king of the angels. He wanted the other angels to bow before him.

That is why God tells us in 1 Peter 5:6 to “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time...” because our tendency is to want to be top dog and it does not matter who we have to step on to get there.

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3) I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north

The “assembly” here is more likely referring to mankind whether it be people in general or Israel specifically. It was not enough for Satan to want to rule over the angels, but he also wanted to rule over people also.

“The recesses of the north” could be referred to in Psalm 48:2-3, **“Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion in the far north, In its palaces, God has made Himself known as a stronghold.”** This is where it says that God will set up His earthly throne. Satan was not satisfied with ruling over the heavenly domain; he wanted to rule over every domain.

That is why God tells us in Jeremiah 45:5 **“But as for you, are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them...”** because our tendency is to want to do great things so that others will love, fear, honor, and respect us. It is OK to do great things so long as our attitude is humble, God is glorified, and others receive the majority of the benefit.

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4) I will ascend above the heights of the clouds

Of the roughly 150 times that clouds are mentioned in the Bible, around 100 of those refer to God’s divine glory. Satan did not just want to rule; he wanted to be worshipped. He wanted to be recognized. He wanted to take some or all of the glory that belongs only to God.

Notice how so much of this is Satan wanting glory, recognition, power, adoration, and worship.

That is why God tells us in Colossians 3:12 **“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”** because we would rather be clothed in glory and praise.

5) I will make myself like the Most High

Here we see the culmination of Satan's sin. But notice that he does not want to be like God. Rather, he wants to be like "the Most High." Satan does not want to stay in the place where God has put him. He does not want to be under God's authority. Instead, he wants to have no one to answer to. He does not want to be accountable to anyone. He is not content to be second or third to the Most High. He wants to be like THE Most High.

This is why God tells us in James 4:6, "But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." The proud struggle and fight and oppress to get what they want. The humble obey God and then He gives the grace.

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That is why God prefaces each of the Beatitudes with "Blessed are the":

- Poor in spirit
- Those who mourn
- The gentle
- Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
- The merciful
- The pure in heart
- The peacemakers
- Those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness
- When people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me

Because we would rather ascend to the top rather than be poor, mournful, gentle, etc.

Remember, too, what lie did Satan use on Eve? "**For God knows that on the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God, knowing good and evil.**" – Genesis 3:5.

Satan's obsession is to drag God's authority down and to raise himself up and he still tries to instill that same attitude in us, also.

How does Satan do that today? What lies does he have us believe so as to usurp God's authority?

- There is no God. Atheism is on the rise. If there is no God then there is no ultimate authority. Yes, there is parental and familial authorities and governmental authority, but there is no final judge who will dispense judgment. If you get away with something, then you have.
- If you think that it is good for you; then it is good, period. We have become the final arbitrators of good, bad, right, and wrong. If it makes me feel good to bully someone, then I will do it with no regard to a higher moral law.

What does Satan's sin have to do with suffering?

This world suffers, this world is broken and corrupt because of Satan's pride. Because of the sins of pride and desire for power and for want of recognition and to usurp God's authority, this world has been filled with wars, murder, rape, human trafficking, and much more.

4.2 People

The fall of mankind is recorded in Genesis 3.

Before the Fall everything was good and in harmony. God initially made all things good. Good was normal. We were connected to everything.

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Man (Adam) was connected to the ground (Adamah)	Genesis 2:7: Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living person.
Man was connected to God	Genesis 1:26: Then God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness..."
Man was connected to other creatures	Genesis 2:19: And out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.
Man was connected to other people	Genesis 2:21-23: So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, "At last this is bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called 'woman,' Because she was taken out of man."
Man was connected to himself	Genesis 2:25: And the man and his wife were both naked, but they were not ashamed.
Man was connected to his purpose	Genesis 2:15: Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and tend it.
Man was connected to the domain that God gave him	Genesis 1:18: God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

After the Fall each of these connections was destroyed. When sin entered, everything became corrupted and broken. Instead of harmony we have separation.

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Some of the consequences of sin are:

We are separated from the ground.	Genesis 3:17, "Cursed is the ground because of you; with hard labor you shall eat from it all the days of your life." Work is hard. We have famines, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes.
We are separated from God.	Whereas God once walked among us in the Garden, now He has become our judge.
We are separated from community.	We have isolation and loneliness. We compete with our neighbors rather than cooperate with them. We are suspicious and fearful of others.

We are separated from each other.	We become murders: Cain killed Abel. It is estimated that in the twentieth century alone, 108 million people have been killed in wars. Though it is impossible to know, it is estimated that in all of human history over 1 billion people have been killed in war. This does not include murder, rape, thief, and other crimes against each other.
We are separated from authority.	We refuse to be humble and admit wrong. We blame others. We justify our words or actions. We make excuses. We think that we are always right because no one else tells us what to do.
We are separated from ourselves.	We are broken emotionally. We are broken physically. We are broken spiritually. We are broken psychologically. We have shame, guilt, confusion, anxiety, and self-loathing. Our thinking is wrong. We are suspicious of God's motives towards us. When we sin and know that it is wrong, we oftentimes justify it rather than humbly repent of it.
We are separated from our God created purpose.	We now refuse to bow before God. We would rather serve ourselves than to serve God. We have made ourselves as the judge and arbitrator of what is true and good.
We are separated from the dominion that God originally gave to us.	Instead of ruling over nature we are destroying it. We pollute. We cause extinctions. We are sadistic.
We are separated from eternal life.	Rather than the assurance of being with God forever; we are condemned to eternal judgment in Hell.

We are in a world full of alienation.

- Sin is not just an "Oops, my bad."
- Sin separates.
- It divides and causes disunity.
- Sin accuses.
- It tears down.
- It corrupts and makes ugly.
- And it is never satisfied.
- It always wants more and more and more.

The start of all of this was the temptation that was precipitated by Satan. He tempted Eve with the same basic sins that he was guilty of.

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Don't believe God	"You certainly will not die!"
God is withholding good from you	"For God knows that on the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened"
You can rise up from the position that God has put you in	"you will become like God"
Only good will come from your rebellion	"knowing good and evil."

How those same sins show themselves time and time again in our lives.

- “Don’t believe God, no harm will come from not reading your Bible or going to church.”
- “God is withholding good from you so look at that pornography.”
- “You can rise up from your position so don’t think that God exists; be your own god and authority. You decide what makes you happy and then go do it without regard to anything else.”
- “Only good will come from your rebellion so fudge a bit on your taxes or take that item from work, you deserve the extra money.”

We even see the same pattern repeated in Scripture from Adam and Eve, to Jesus, to warnings to Christians.

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Sin	Genesis 3:6 (Adam & Eve being tempted to take from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil)	Luke 4:2-12 (Jesus being tempted by Satan)	1 John 2:1 (Christians tempted in general)
Pleasure/Physical Appetite	Good for food	Tell this stone to become bread	Lust of the flesh
Greed	Delight to the eyes	I will give You all this domain and its glory	Lust of the eyes
Pride	Desirable to make one wise	If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here	Boastful pride of life

Those are the three big categories of sin with near infinite variations.

Why is it important to understand that suffering is the result of our rebellion against God?

[Slide for each point]

- 1) Otherwise, we think that pain, suffering, sickness, and death are normal. This is how the world was created and so we should just accept that this is what God meant. No. This is not what God’s desire or original plans were. All of these things are the result of a broken, corrupted world. That is why there will be no more death or tears in heaven. That will be when we return to God’s original ideal state. But then it will be truly forever.
- 2) We blame God for the horrors that are in the world rather than blaming ourselves. We are victims rather than villains. This is all God’s fault.
- 3) Jesus came primarily as a good teacher and as an example. Since rebellion is not the real problem, propitiation is not necessary.

We just looked at why there is suffering.

5 What are the sources of suffering?

We just looked at why suffering came into the world. Now we will look at what causes suffering in our lives.

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There are four sources of suffering:

- 1) God
- 2) The Devil
- 3) Ourselves
- 4) A broken world

5.1 The action of God

God may cause suffering but nearly always as a response to sin. It is God's judgment of rebellion, disobedience, and sin.

This may come by five different means.

- a) The judgment is directly from God

When Adam and Eve sinned, they were driven from the Garden by God, **"So He drove the man out..."** – Genesis 3:24.

Another example is Sodom and Gomorrah, **"the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah"** – Genesis 13:10.

Does God still work this way today? I don't know, but it is certainly possible, but how would we know? Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire and brimstone. If a town is destroyed today by a volcano erupting or by a raging fire or earthquake or flood, how do we know that it was just a natural occurrence with no judgment from God versus that happening because it was a judgment from God?

- b) The judgment is through human agents

God used Babylon as His agent of judgment against Israel for their sins of idolatry and rebellion against Him: 2 Chronicles 36:14-21.

God will use the government to punish those who disobey. We see that in Romans 13:1-7.

- c) The judgment is the natural consequence of the laws of righteousness and sin that God created

Without God's mercy, sin will further corrupt people and drag them down into more vile depths of degradation. Every sin can reap its own harvest of destruction.

Romans 1:24, "Therefore God gave them up to vile impurity in the lusts of their hearts, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them."

Job 4:8, "According to what I have seen, those who plow wrongdoing and those who sow trouble harvest it."

- d) The final judgment at the end of the age

This is when all unbelievers will stand before God at the end of earthly history and will be cast into Hell.

Revelation 20:15, “And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

e) God’s discipline of believers

When Christians sin, God may discipline us for our own good.

Hebrews 12:5-6, “and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, my son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are punished by Him; for whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He punishes every son whom He accepts.”

1 Corinthians 11:29-30 is God’s discipline for those who misuse the Lord’s Communion, “For the one who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not properly recognize the body. For this reason, many among you are weak and sick, and a number are asleep.”

But consider **Job 5:17-18**

**17 “Behold, happy is the person whom God disciplines,
So do not reject the discipline of the Almighty.
18 For He inflicts pain, and gives relief;
He wounds, but His hands also heal.**

Discipline is good because it teaches us to do what is right. But notice the progression.

We sin > God disciplines > God heals

God does not leave us wounded.

5.2 The devil can cause suffering

1 Peter 5:8-9

8 Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 So resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brothers and sisters who are in the world.

Notice the link between the suffering that many Christians around the world experience and that it is caused by the devil who is “seeking someone to devour.” God causes suffering, through discipline, to make us holy and bring us closer to Himself. The devil causes suffering to make us want to give up and pull further away from God.

What are some ways that Satan tries to do this?

[Slide for each]

Scripture	Method	Examples
Genesis 3:1, “Has God really said”	Doubting what God has said. This suffering pulls us out from God’s grace and puts us into confusion.	“I’m going through a really rough patch right now. God doesn’t love me.” “God surely doesn’t want me to

		<p>share the Gospel with people. I don't think that He would want people to not like me."</p> <p>"There's plenty of people at church who can serve. There is no benefit for me to be just another helper in an already crowded field."</p>
Revelation 2:10, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison"	God has people betray and lie about others. Once in prison, they are exposed to greater sin and fear. Many Christians outside of America are imprisoned for their faith.	<p>"If only I recant my faith, then I will be able to go free."</p> <p>"I'm innocent. If God truly cared about me, He wouldn't have let this imprisonment happen."</p>
Luke 13:11, "And there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent over double, and could not straighten up at all."	By making us sick, we are tempted to focus solely on ourselves and to turn our eyes from God.	<p>"I've prayed for healing, and I'm still sick. Why bother?"</p> <p>"If God really loved me, I wouldn't be sick."</p>
1 Peter 5:8, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."	How do lions bring down their prey? By frightening the herd and finding the one that breaks off from the pack. Then the lion devours it.	<p>"I don't need to go to a church building; I can get everything that I need from watching it on TV or the internet."</p> <p>"Why bother getting with other Christians? They don't care about me. They ever only talk about themselves."</p>
John 8:44, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies."	Satan will throw out lie after lie in order to deceive believers and non-believers alike.	<p>"As long as you do your best, you'll be OK. God loves you and will let you into heaven."</p> <p>"You don't need to be part of a church. Your inner spirituality is enough."</p> <p>"The church is full of hypocrites." Well, yes, but so is everywhere else because humans are hypocrites no matter where they are.</p>

We need to be alert to these lies. They will be subtle. They will creep up on us gradually. And before you know it, we're hooked. A town does not burn down because a giant ball of fire suddenly engulfed it all at once. It starts with a small fire that was neglected and got bigger and bigger.

Even if the devil does not directly attack us with these tactics, they originated with him, and this world's culture, perspective, and mentality will continue to use them. That is because the devil is the one who, at this point, controls the world. Read **Ephesians 2:2**:

in which you previously walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

We see this in other verses.

1 John 5:19, "We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one."

2 Corinthians 4:4, "in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they will not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

Satan does not have to attack us directly because the world will do his dirty work for him. We need to be alert to it. We need to be aware of it so that we do not get sucked into it.

The more we sin, the more we will suffer. Why?

- Because our conscience will shout at us.
- God will not bless us.
- We will drive people away from us.
- We will have guilt.

5.3 Ourselves and other people

a) Our own disobedience and sin

God created a moral universe that has laws both for blessings and for judgments.

Deuteronomy 28:1-14 is a list of blessings that will happen when you follow God's commandments.

Verses 15-46 is a list of curses that will happen when you do not follow God's commandments.

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 all have of the same format: do this good thing and you will receive this blessing.

It works the same way with the government. Obey the laws of the government and you will generally be safer and be left alone. But if you disobey the government, you have a good chance of being arrested. Romans 13 verifies this.

But there is a huge difference between the government and God. Well, several, but one is that you may be able to get away with breaking the law if no one catches you. But God will ALWAYS catch you because God sees and knows everything.

The universe is not agnostic. Just as it has laws of physics and chemistry that were created by God, it has laws of morality that were just as much created by God.

b) Wrong thinking can have dire results

Herod thought far more highly of himself than he should have and it ended poorly for him. **Acts 12:21-23, "On an appointed day, after putting on his royal apparel, Herod took his seat on the**

rostrum and began delivering an address to them. 22 The people repeatedly cried out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” 23 And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.”

In Matthew 26, Peter did not think rightly about who Jesus was and His sovereignty and so denied Jesus three times. Then he went and wept.

If you think that money is what will make you happy then you will make earning as much as you can as your primary focus in life and crush anyone in your path.

If you think that your title is what defines you, then you will step on and run over anyone who stands in your way of achieving that.

c) The sins of others

The evil choices of other people can directly and severely impact our own lives.

- A drunk driver kills someone.
- A porch pirate steals needed medicine.
- The guy you like is interested in someone else so you spread malicious lies about that person.
- A father abandons his family.

Also, there is persecution. Open Doors USA estimated that 360 million Christians last year lived in countries where persecution was “significant.” Roughly 5,600 Christians were murdered, more than 6,000 were detained or imprisoned, and another 4,000-plus were kidnapped. More than 5,000 churches and other religious facilities were destroyed. And that is just one year. That means that 43 Christians are killed, imprisoned, or kidnapped each day.

People will tempt us. Just look at advertisements.

No matter where sin comes from, it will always diminish you. It will never make you stronger, better, or, ultimately, happier.

Sometimes, if we know why we are suffering it helps us to devise a way out of it. But ultimately, it usually doesn’t matter so much why we suffering, but, rather, how we are going to response to it.

5.4 A broken world

Another source of suffering is a broken world.

- Earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes
- Disease, illness, cancer
- Mechanical failure
- Icy roads and sidewalks, trees falling, rabid animals

These are things that “just” happen. Why? Because this world is distorted. It is twisted and corrupted.

We just looked at the four sources of suffering:

- 1) The action of God
- 2) The Devil

- 3) Ourselves and other people
- 4) A broken world

6 Wrong thinking about suffering

We have just spent a good of time discussing why suffering is in the world and what causes it today. But what if we were not paying attention and did not get any of that? So what?

Wrong thinking about suffering can cause us to be judgmental, uncaring, and to respond wrongly both to when we are suffering and when others are suffering.

6.1 Wrong thinking by Christians

As Christians, it is unfortunately very easy for us to have wrong thinking about suffering especially if it is the other person who is suffering.

Here are some ways that we can think wrongly about suffering.

- 1) All suffering is a direct consequence of sin
- 2) Suffering is really blessing in disguise
- 3) If we only have enough faith, our suffering will go away

Let's take a look at each one.

6.1.1 All suffering is a direct consequence of our sin

We suffer because we deserve it as a consequence of something wrong that we have done or thought. The idea that trials are a direct retaliation for some specific sin.

This is completely refuted by **John 9:1-3**

As Jesus passed by, He saw a man who had been blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

Notice that the disciples had this very wrong way of thinking. They assumed that the suffering of this man—that he was born blind—was caused by his own sin or, since he was blind from birth which means that it could not have been his own sin, then it must have been his parents' sin. But clearly, they surmised, it was the result of someone's sin.

But Jesus quickly rebutted this thinking. "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents..." This man's suffering was not the direct result of personal sin.

Also, the reverse angle proves the same argument. If sin causes suffering, then why do the wicked prosper? We see this question in several passages of Scripture.

Psalm 73:3-4

For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pains in their death, and their belly is fat.

Psalm 10:4-5

The wicked, in his haughtiness, does not seek Him. There is no God in all his schemes. His ways succeed at all times; yet Your judgments are on high, out of his sight; as for all his enemies, he snorts at them.

If suffering is always the result of sin, then is God more merciful to the wicked that their lives might be more successful? Of course not.

Why is it so wrong to think that all suffering is a direct consequence of sin?

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- 1) We become judgmental. If we see someone suffering whether it is health, financial, relationships or anything else, it must be because they did something wrong. We may not have seen the sin and apparently neither did anyone else, but it must be there. So we speculate. Is it pornography? Spousal abuse? Unforgiveness? We know that it must be something so we start watching them for clues. We see sin in their lives lurking behind every tree and under every pebble. We judge their motives. "I saw him cleaning up the church, but I bet that that was because he wanted people to see what a great person he is and pat him on the back."

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With this way of thinking, the person suffering does not deserve compassion, rather he deserves condemnation.

- 2) We lose compassion.

"They're don't have any money because they're lazy."

"They're in poor health because they didn't take care of themselves."

"They're bullied because they don't stand up for themselves."

The oppressed, the vulnerable, the depressed, the struggling are in those situations because they got themselves into it. They deserve what they got.

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We see a dirty beggar on the side of the road and think, "Maybe if they cleaned themselves up and got a job, any kind of job, they wouldn't have to beg."

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But in the Bible, Jesus saw a dirty beggar on the side of the road and was filled with compassion. He did not judge, rather, He healed.

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There is a statue outside of a church in Syracuse, NY. It depicts Jesus as a beggar. You can see the nail hole in His hand. The sign behind Him from Matthew 25:40 reads, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me."

Think about that verse in our context. When you show compassion to someone who is suffering, you are doing unto Jesus.

Psalms 106 and 107 illustrate how God has compassion even on those who deserve suffering. We see the same pattern over and over. Here are snippets of the verses.

Psalm 106 Verses 6-12

"We have sinned"
"Rebelled"
"Gone astray"
"Behaved wickedly"
"Nevertheless He saved them"

Psalm 106 Verses 13-46

"They quickly forgot His works"
"Became lustfully greedy"
"Rebellious"
"He heard their cry"
"He also made them objects of compassion"

Psalm 107 Verses 10-16

"They had rebelled"
"He humbled their heart"
"They cried out to the Lord"
"He brought them out of darkness"

Psalm 107 Verses 17-22

"Their rebellious way"
"Their guilty deeds"
"They came close to the gates of death"
"They cried out to the Lord"
"He saved them"

You would think that God who knows how dark our hearts can be and how evil our thoughts can become, would be the one who most thinks that we deserve to suffer. But even when people deserve to suffer, God, over and over and over, still has compassion.

If you read those sins highlighted in red you would think, "Ha! I bet they got what they deserved!" But no, instead they got mercy. Because our God is a God of compassion.

Psalm 103:13-14 drives this home:

**Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.
14 For He Himself knows our form;
He is mindful that we are nothing but dust.**

God knows that we are weak, confused, and vulnerable and because of that He has compassion on us. We should do the same.

When you see someone suffering, how close might you be to being in that same situation? 1 Corinthians 15:10, "But by the grace of God I am what I am.." Or as is commonly said, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Though we are made in the image of God, we should be so glad that God does not act like us. Where we are often quick to condemn, God is quicker to show compassion.

- 3) It adds to the pain of those who are suffering. Not only are they in pain from the suffering, but on top of that, they have the guilt of thinking that it is all their fault. "If only I had been a better person then this wouldn't have happened." They beat themselves. They are defeated before they even give God the chance to give them the victory. And we, instead of trying to lessen their burden are only adding to it.
- 4) It warps our response to their suffering. Instead of offering comfort or perhaps a solution, our emphasis is on their repentance. "If only you'd repent and put away your sin, then, and only then, will things get better." The solution to depression is repentance. The solution to grieving is repentance. The solution to confusion is repentance. Instead of offering our shoulder to cry on, we push their shoulders and tell them to straighten up. Instead of God lifting their burden, we pile it on.

We read how Job's friends accused him of being in his position because of his own sin. In Job 15, Eliphaz says, "The wicked person writhes in pain all his days..." and "fire consumes the tents of the corrupt."

Job's response in chapter 16 was:

**1 Then Job responded,
2 "I have heard many things like these;
Miserable comforters are you all!
3 Is there no end to windy words?
Or what provokes you that you answer?
4 I too could speak like you,
If only I were in your place.
I could compose words against you
And shake my head at you."**

How poignant are his words. Could we not at some time in our lives have said the same thing to another? "It's easy for you to sit there and criticize me. You who are doing well and me who is at the bottom. But let us switch places and see if you can endure the same words that you are thundering at me."

Then in verse 5 Job tells us what he really needs:

**Or I could strengthen you with my mouth,
And the condolence of my lips could lessen your pain.**

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Job was saying that his friends had two routes to take: 1) Wagging their fingers in his face and tearing him down, or 2) Strengthening him and helping to lessen his pain.

Think back at times that you were confronted by someone's suffering. Which route did you take?

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Or perhaps you chose number 3, ignore him and hope that he does not burden you with his troubles.

Job's friends were incorrect in assuming that suffering must be the result of sin. At the end of Job, it is said that they were wrong. When someone is going through a trial, we cannot argue back from their suffering to a necessary previous sin.

Yes, there are times when someone's suffering is a direct result of sin.

- The one who is broke and in debt because he gambled away everything.
- The one who lost his family because of his temper and his controlling attitude.
- The one whose health is bad because they smoke a pack of cigarettes a day.
- The one who is divorced because of infidelity.

But these are cases where we see direct cause and effect. If this is not obvious, then we should not presume. We should not put on our sin sniffer and try to root it out.

- 5) The reason for the suffering and why it continues is because of a lack of faith. This not only calls into question the maturity of their Christianity but even the existence of their Christianity. The real problem, according to this thinking, may not be that they have too little faith, but do they even have any faith?

In this perspective, the focus of their suffering becomes the weakness of their faith.

Here are some people who directly tied suffering to faith.

Kenneth E. Hagan's teaching has been called "the most 'orthodox' form of Word of Faith prosperity teaching." He founded the RHEMA Bible Training Center in 1974 and for the next 20 years more than 10,000 students were taught his prosperity doctrine.

He said this in "Don't blame God,"

"Healing belongs to you. It belongs to you because sickness is of the enemy. It belongs to you because you are a spiritual child of Abraham. It belongs to you because sickness is a curse, and Christ has redeemed you from the curse of the law."

Notice who is responsible for your healing and for your suffering: you. If you are healed, you have great faith. If you are not healed, then it is your fault.

Benny Hinn is another health and wealth preacher. He said, "The reason people lose their healing, is because they begin questioning if God really did it."

Again, the fault of not being healed is because you don't have enough faith. The fault is yours. You had doubts; therefore, you are suffering.

This is from Oral Roberts.

Faith is not something you have to get. It's something that you, as a born-again child of God, already have. Act on it by releasing it to God. That's when your healing starts!

And from Joel Osteen.

If you want success, if you want wisdom, if you want to be prosperous and healthy, you're going to have to do more than meditate and believe; you must boldly declare words of faith and victory over yourself and your family.

And finally, from Kenneth Copeland.

... we receive healing from God the same way. We take Him at His Word. We believe we are healed, not because we feel healed or look healed at this moment but because God said we are. By faith, we start talking like we're healed. We start acting like we're healed. Before long, our bodies line up with God's Word and it becomes apparent to everyone that we truly are healed!

Some people are reluctant to receive their healing by faith. They think it's too hard to do. So they just go to the doctor or wait around hoping someone will lay hands on them and zap them with the power of God.

Now is the time for you to receive your healing. Say this out loud: "Thank you, Father God, that by stripes of your son Jesus, I am healed. Thank you that these symptoms are disappearing right now. Thank you that I have divine health today and every day. Amen." You can receive your healing by faith. God ordained it. Jesus paid for it. Now it's time for you to get to it!

What are they saying? If you are suffering, it is your own fault. Even if the cause of suffering was not originally of your own doing, the fact that it remains is your own lack of faith.

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But it is not just the health and wealth people saying this. Remember the book "Chicken Soup for the Soul"? It is the best-selling non-fiction book series of all time. It was written by Jack Canfield. The original book and series premise is the reassuring message that anyone is capable of anything — that with the right attitude, you can heal yourself, find love, and become rich.

But if you are the author of your own fate, you are also to blame for your own suffering — no matter how far beyond your control it may seem. Canfield calls it taking 100% responsibility. "A lot of people get cancer," he says. "But I always ask them: Did you eat an organic diet? Did you drink filtered water? You're responsible for maintaining your ignorance. You're responsible for not making enough money to be able to afford the stuff you need to be able to buy."

The underlying basis is something called "The Law of Attraction." This teaches that anything you concentrate on or wish for will become reality.

When someone has cancer at six and dies, he explains, it might be because their "mother's going to need to learn how to let go and not be attached. Sometimes people come in and they have a short life and they're teaching us unconditional love." So what he is saying is that sometimes children need to die to teach their parents a lesson? No. That is simply wrong.

Consider this, a six-year-old girl who is sexually abused by a relative is not to blame for her suffering. And if she is traumatized by it for years to come, that is not because she lacks faith.

Where does this thinking leave us? Most people are not able to think or work themselves into a better life. They do not become twice as rich or are completely healed. So that leaves them in even greater despair and hopelessness because they are not better and it is all their fault.

Notice what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

7 Because of the extraordinary greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, in behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Oh, how I wish that I had the depth of faith that Paul had. He heard the risen Jesus speak to him directly. Yet notice here that he had a “thorn in the flesh” and even though he pleaded with the Lord, it remained. If Paul did not have enough faith to be healed then where does that leave the rest of us?

[Slide of Paul]

Not only that, but he continued to not only have weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties, but he boasted in them.

[Paradise, then Not]

Because, and here is the key, his goal was not to have a life that was all rainbows and sunshine.

[Jesus]

His goal was to imitate Christ.

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Jesus suffered more than anyone—He was the Man of Sorrows--yet He was the One who was most innocent.

6.1.2 Suffering is ultimately a good thing because so much benefit can come out of it if we just allow that to happen

A second wrong thinking about suffering is that it is ultimately a good thing.

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Suffering is just a shell and if we crack it open then we will see inside the true benefit and reason for that suffering. Suffering is a mask, a disguise. We just need to develop supernatural eyes to see the good that suffering is hiding.

Why is this thinking wrong? It can lead to some wrong perceptions.

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- 1) This leads to a response of “Just look on the bright side...” We lose compassion. Why weep with someone who is in pain when, in the end, it will all turn out for the better anyway?
 - “You’ve got malignant cancer? Well, just think how much God can use that.”
 - “You’ve lost a child? Well, praise God. He will really use that in your life to make you more like Himself.”
 - “Your marriage is in ruins? Focus on what blessings you will get from that. It’s all good.”Suffering becomes nothing more than “a smile is just a frown turned upside-down.” This denies people who are grieving and broken the ability to express their pain, their anger, their sorrow. Everything becomes good if we only have the eyes to see it. We become cheerleaders rather than comforters.

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- 2) We take the man born blind and apply it to all suffering.

John 9:2-3

2 And His disciples asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

This man was born blind “so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” “See,” this wrong thinking says, “this man’s suffering was just a trampoline for something bigger and better.”

This makes God the source of all of our trials, all of our hurts, all of our suffering. We mistake suffering as being the result of sin and evil and instead make it the result of the desires of a good God. All sorrow and misery becomes “God’s will.” God is not someone that we turn to in order to put out the fires in our life; He is the one who started them. God’s sovereignty becomes something to fear rather than something to trust.

All suffering becomes the will of God and so we make God the source of all of our suffering.

We wind up using God’s sovereignty to bludgeon people—We say, “Don’t you see, God gave you this to make you a better person?”—rather than using God’s grace to comfort that person.

Do you see the formula here? You are suffering; God is sovereign; therefore, to be all gloomy is to assail God’s sovereignty. With this thinking, your efforts are not to give grace, but rebuke.

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- 3) This forbids people from expressing their true, legitimate feelings.

Why grieve?

Why talk about the pain, the sorrow, the loneliness, the hurt, the confusion, the doubt?

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Why cry? You should laugh instead. Your suffering is merely the embryo of something much more glorious. Your suffering is just a caterpillar.

And yet, the Bible often records people being grieved.

Psalm 130:1, “Out of the depths I have cried to You, Lord.”

Psalm 6:3, “And my soul is greatly horrified; but You, Lord—how long?”

Psalm 38:6, “I am bent over and greatly bowed down; I go in mourning all day long.”

Psalm 13:2, “How long am I to feel anxious in my soul, with grief in my heart all the day?”

Were all of these prayers wrong? Did God put them into the Bible to show us what NOT to do? No. These are honest laments. They express the true heart of the people who wrote them. God put them there to show us that it is OK for us to be honest with Him.

The Psalms are full of cries of anguish, of confusion, of brokenness. If you read through all 150 of the Psalms and write down every passage where the psalmist pours out his heart in grief and sorrow, you would have pages and pages full.

In fact, the Bible talks about God the Trinity being grieved.

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Jesus:

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus said, “My soul is deeply grieved...” - Matthew 26:38

Holy Spirit:

“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” - Ephesians 4:30

“But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit” – Isaiah 63:10

God the Father:

“So the Lord was sorry that He had made mankind on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.” – Genesis 6:6

If grieving is wrong then God is wrong. And we know that is blasphemy.

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God does not want us to hold up a yellow cardboard smiley face in front of our own face. He wants us to be honest. He wants us to be raw, if necessary. He can handle it.

By claiming that everything is sunny just around the corner prevents us from expressing our anger, our sadness, and our mourning.

There is no virtue in plastic smiles from people living miles from reality who pretend that it is not what it really is.

Grief is the appropriate response to pain, sickness, loss, and death. Death is the enemy. Pain is the enemy. The decay of our body is the enemy. We should never let our suffering form our identity. We should not let it dominate our lives. But it IS a part of our lives and to deny or ignore that is to be fake before other people and before God.

Yes, God can use our trials to cleanse us. He can use our pain to draw us to Himself. He can use our anger to bring us to repentance.

Romans 8:28 confirms this.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

But that verse does not mean that God causes the pain or that suffering is really a blessing in disguise. It does not mean that God will make all of the bad go away and life will be just as it was before.

If you lose your job and are in financial ruin and lose your house, Romans 8:28 does not mean that God will restore your fortunes.

If your family member is dying, Romans 8:28 does not mean that God will restore that person back to full health.

If that person who you thought you were going to marry dumps you and you are so heartbroken that you can't breathe, Romans 8:28 does not mean that God will bring that person back to you.

It means that God can pull good out of any situation. He can set you back on your feet so that you can move forward. He can use it to make you more like Himself.

Yes, that family member died and you are grief stricken. Your life will now be more difficult. That loss will be in your every waking moment. That pain will stab at your heart over and over again. But while you were at the hospital, that nurse or the room's other patient heard your faith and got saved. Or you took the comfort that you received from God and others and decided to actively bring that comfort to others in similar situations in any number of ways. For example: creating personal cards of comfort and leaving them with families going through similar struggles or forming a comfort group where people can come together and share like our very own GriefShare.

"Work together for good" does not mean working it out so that everything is resolved and taken care of and there is no more problem.

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4) We counsel that everything is OK when we should not

We see these verses in Ezekiel 13:8-11a

8 Therefore, this is what the Lord God says: "Because you have spoken deceit and have seen a lie, therefore behold, I am against you," declares the Lord God.

What is the deceit and lie that God is speaking of? What is God against?

9 “So My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will have no place in the council of My people, nor will they be written down in the register of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel, so that you may know that I am the Lord God.

10 It is definitely because they have misled My people by saying, ‘Peace!’ when there is no peace. And when anyone builds a wall, behold, they plaster it over with whitewash;

11 so tell those who plaster it over with whitewash, that it will fall.

What was the deceit? What was the lie? What was God against? He was against people saying that “everything is OK; that there is peace” when there was no peace. When there, instead, was grief and sorrow and sin.

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To whitewash something is to make something bad seem acceptable by hiding the truth. In the metaphor in Ezekiel, a wall is covered with decay or junk or is in a state of ruin and instead of fixing it properly, it is covered with a thin, cheap mixture in an attempt to make it look better. But whitewash does not last very long. Eventually it fades or runs down exposing the true surface underneath. Whitewash never fixes, it never resolves. It merely covers up the truth state of the object.

The context of this passage is that God was going to judge Israel for her sins. Ezekiel gave five messages on the certainty and imminency of this judgment. This was the third of those messages and addressed the problem of prophets giving false hope by glossing over the real problem and issue.

However, I believe that the same principles expressed in this passage also can be applied to people who try to gloss over suffering by preaching a false hope.

What was the error of the prophets? They were preaching that everything was OK when it was not OK.

This is echoed in Jeremiah 6:14, **“They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, Saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ But there is no peace.”**

People will not heal by pretending that their suffering is not really what they think it is. You are not really providing comfort, support, or rebuilding. You are merely whitewashing their life.

6.1.3 Forcing a reason or explanation for suffering

We like explanations. We want to know “why.” And sometimes when we do not understand why something is happening, we conjure up some explanation. But doing that oftentimes causes more harm than good.

“The child died because God needed more angels.” No, God does not need more angels. He has plenty. God created all of the original angels out of nothing. He does not need to kill people to manufacture more angels.

“It’s all in God’s plan.” Or “God wants to teach you something.” Most likely it is not. Most likely it is the result of a broken and corrupt world. God can use it, but that is not the same as saying that God caused it.

Suffering often has no easy answers.

When Job asked God why he was suffering, God did not answer his question. Instead, God pointed to Himself and how great He is.

Unless there is some obvious reason (you are financial straits because you gambled away all of your money. Your spouse left you because you committed adultery), it is best to avoid trying to think of a reason why. This applies either when you are suffering or especially when someone else is suffering. What is more important is right thinking and a right response.

6.2 Wrong thinking by non-Christians

6.2.1 Suffering proves that there is no God

In the movie “Freud’s Last Session,” Sigmund Freud, who is an atheist, bases his atheism on the concept of “Why could such a creator allow evil?”

Richard Dawkins, in his book “River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life” wrote this:

If there ever is a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in the population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

Notice what he is saying here, that even when things go well, balance will ultimately be upset and chaos and destruction will take over and we will return to the status quo of misery. However things work out, it is all just random. There is no reason, it is just a roll of the dice and we have no choice but to accept it.

He establishes in his logic the unspoken premise that God is love. And because God is love, therefore, there should never be any suffering or pain anywhere. But because there is suffering, there is no God. It is a pretty narrow line of reasoning which does not allow any other factors to enter into his argument. There is no place for free-will or God’s free gifts of grace or heaven. There is no allowance for mercy, forgiveness, sin, or justice. There is just a straight line from love to suffering to no God.

Dawkins may say that suffering proves that there is no God; but comfort, grace, and forgiveness prove that there is.

But notice at the end he says there is “no evil, no good.”

Yet in January 2006, the same Richard Dawkins released a movie called “The Root of All Evil?” This movie was later retitled “The God Delusion.” In it, Dawkins argues that humanity would be better off without religion or belief in God.

But if there is no evil then how can religion be the root of all evil? He blatantly contradicts himself on his main point.

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6.3 When we have wrong thinking about suffering, there are consequences

When we think wrongly about why we suffer, we can develop perspectives that are twisted from reality and will impede our ability to recover. Here are some possibilities in addition to the ones already stated.

- 1) God becomes a watcher rather than an active and caring participant. He has left us on our own. There is no divine comfort or grace. We have to figure all of this out on our own. We give up on God. We feel like we have to fix everything ourselves. This attitude may work with broken cars and lamps but becomes much more difficult when dealing with other people and circumstances; things which are constantly changing.
- 2) Or worse, God is responsible for the terrible state of the world. He is the one to blame. He is not the One who helps us out of the fire. He is the One who lights the fire.
- 3) Rather than be solution orientated, we become problem orientated. Instead of putting our mind to seeking God, we focus our efforts on seeking who to blame. In Numbers 14:2 Israel blamed Moses and Aaron, "And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron..." Adam blamed Eve. "The woman whom You gave to be with me..." – Genesis 3:12. Eve blamed the serpent. "The serpent deceived me..." – Genesis 2:13. We develop the same response to every trial, "I'm in this predicament because of someone else's fault."

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- 4) We evaluate God's love by our circumstances. The psalmist in Psalm 10:1 doubted God's presence because he was going through a trial, "Why do You stand far away, Lord? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?" In Exodus 5:22 Moses blamed God for the troubles that Israel was going through, "Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, 'Lord, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me?'" We measure God's favor by how comfortable we currently are. "When things are going well, I'll go to church and read my Bible and love God. But when things do not go well, then it proves that God hates me and since going to church and reading the Bible didn't make my life any easier, I might as well stop doing those things." Do we love God for who He is or for what kind of life we have?

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- 5) Or we remove God from the equation altogether. Suffering is normal. We lose the historicity of Genesis 1 – 3. Adam and Eve become allegories or metaphors rather than real people. Creationism is replaced by impersonal evolution. There is no Fall. The Bible becomes just a nice book. There are no promises, just heartwarming sayings.

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As we have studied, there are many negative consequences to having wrong thinking about suffering:

- Lack of compassion
- Being judgmental
- Easy but wrong answers
- Easy but wrong remedies
- Denying the sufferer to grieve properly
- We say "peace, peace" when there is no peace

- We leave God out of the solution

Having a right theology of suffering is crucial. Without a correct foundation, the building will crack and fall. To heal properly, we must think properly.

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7 Suffering gives us two choices

When we are suffering, we have two choices, two paths to decide. We see this in Job 2:9, “Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still hold firm your integrity? Curse God and die!’”

And therein are our two choices:

1. Hold firm to our integrity, to our faith, to our community

or

2. Curse God and die emotionally, spiritually, and socially

Will our suffering make us bitter, angry, and constantly complaining or will it make us reach out to God, reach out to other people?

The consequences of one choice spirals us into the quagmire of self-pity and defeat. The other leads us to grace and triumph even if the suffering remains.

Consider James 1:2-4

2 Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

I always thought that if there was any verse in the Bible that was a contraction, it was this one. If you consider it joy, then it is no longer a trial. But that is not true. Joy and trials are not incompatible. You can be in the midst of a trial—it could be a severe trial—but you can still be joyful. This is because you know that you are being watched over by a good and sovereign God. And though the suffering is awful, you are still loved and even if there is no hope of escaping the pain in this world; you are confident that you will forever escape it in the next.

And 2 Corinthians 4:16- 18 gives us hope beyond what we could ever imagine.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer person is decaying, yet our inner person is being renewed day by day. 17 For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

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Notice the contrast here.

Decay versus Renewal

Momentary	versus	Eternal
Light Affliction	versus	Weight of Glory
Seen	versus	Not Seen
Temporal	versus	Eternal

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Does anyone know the artist and name of this painting?

Leonardo da Vinci, "Virgin of the Rocks."

The four characters in the painting are Mary in the center, John the Baptist on the left, an angel on the right, and Jesus the infant closest to us blessing John. Notice how they are close together. They are bathed in a warm glow. There are flowers around them. It is a very welcoming group. You want to walk over to them and sit down and enjoy their company.

Now look at the background. They are in a grotto. The rocks are jagged and rough. The colors are drab. There are no flowers or really any plants there. It is cold and hostile. It looks like it would be hard to walk around in.

The grotto reminds me of the world. As hard as we try to do well in it and though we know that we are stuck in it, the world can be cruel and unrelenting and difficult.

Being close to and in the presence of Jesus, in contrast, is reassuring and comfortable and safe. In that place are blessings and protection.

The choice is ours: the presence of Christ or the grotto. Or as Deuteronomy 30:15 says, "**See, I have placed before you today life and happiness, and death and adversity...**" When you are in a trial, which will you choose?

This study, obviously, is going to ask us to hold firm to our integrity and, by doing so, will not just bring us through the pain but to strengthen us in the process.

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8 Jesus can relate to our pain because He has experienced it Himself

Most of us are probably familiar with the story of Zaccheus. We have sang the song:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man
And a wee little man was he
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see

The story is in Luke 19 starting in verse 1

He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 And there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich. 3 Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. 4 So he ran

on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. 5 When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, “Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.”

Why did Jesus invite Himself to Zaccheus’ house? Was it because he was “small in stature”? That is what we usually think of when we think of Zaccheus.

But, no. Jesus came to Zaccheus because Zaccheus fought through the obstacles that were preventing him from being close to Jesus. There was a large crowd that was not letting Zaccheus force his way through to the front to see Jesus. But Zaccheus was resourceful and ran ahead and climbed a tree. Jesus was impressed enough to single out Zaccheus and come into his house.

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Life throws many obstacles at us when it comes to being close to Jesus: the promise of riches, the lust of power, alcohol, anger, pride, personal sins, not wanting to be rejected by others, and on and on. Many of us do not make the effort to fight through these obstacles, but when we do, Jesus sees us and comes near.

The point of this study is for us to go to God with our suffering because He can comfort us, He can heal us, He can give us hope. But why? Is it because He knows everything? Well, yes. Is it because He is compassionate? That is true. But there is another reason. One that is more intimate, more personal.

How many times how you seen a terrible tragedy and felt pity for those who are experiencing it? You may wish that you can do something to help them but the best you do is offer up a prayer from the comfort of your living room. It may even bother you for days, but you have done all that you think you can do.

But that is not God. God is not one who sits at a distance on His throne and shakes His head saying, “Those poor, poor people” and leaves it at that.

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God does more than relate; He became.

- **He became** a baby in a small, dusty Middle Eastern town to common parents.
- **He became** a human and lived a life surrounded not just by sinners, but also by the lame, the sick, the blind, the oppressed, the poor. And He did not just see these terrible sufferings, He experienced much of it.
- **He became** the Man of Sorrows.
- **He became** our sin.
- **He became** the Lamb of God, slaughtered, that we might be brought to God.

The Jews of Jesus’ time rejected Him because they expected the Messiah to come as the conquering king. Not as a common laborer who did a few small miracles. Jesus’ life was often one of sorrows. But it was exactly in those sorrows that He accomplished His life’s work. He actually was the conquering King, but what He conquered was not Rome; it was sin and death. Things much more powerful, much more pervasive.

God's own story is one of suffering and death, of rejection and mocking.

Hebrews 4:15-16

¹⁵**For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but **One who has been tempted in all things** as we are, yet without sin.**

¹⁶**Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

What are a few ways in which Jesus suffered as many of us are now?

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Loneliness: Matthew 26:46, "About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, " ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

Temptation: Matthew 4:1, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

Death of close relative/friend: Matthew 14:11-13, "And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus. Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself..."

Physical pain: Matthew 27:35, "And when they had crucified Him..."

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Betrayal by a close friend: Matthew 26:47-48a, "While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, who came from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign..."

Falsely accused: Matthew 26:59, "Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death."

Abandonment by friends: Matthew 26:71-72, "When he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.' And again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.'"

Financial loss/homelessness: Matthew 8:20, "Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'"

Of course in Isaiah 53:3-5 we read one of the most condensed descriptions of terrible suffering by one person. Notice all of the words of suffering in red.

³He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

⁴Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
⁵But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.

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The Man of Sorrows has become the God all comfort.

Can Jesus Christ relate to our own personal suffering? Yes.

Jesus demonstrates another principle in the Bible, that of death and resurrection. We see this in John 12:24, **“Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”**

[Slide with each sentence]

A grain of wheat dies, then spouts with life, leading to much fruit.

Joseph was in prison, then released, leading to being second in command.

Paul was struck blind, then healed, leading to being a key Christian in the early church.

Jesus died, then was resurrected, leading to glory in heaven.

We, throughout our lives, suffer, then resurrect out of that suffering, leading to a life closer to Christ.

We come to Jesus in our sufferings because He knows. He knows.

Matthew 11:28-30

28 “Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light.”

9 How should we respond to our own suffering?

That finishes the theological foundation. We should have a good basis for right thinking and understanding. That is important because that is the foundation for the rest of this study.

Now we can examine how we should respond to suffering.

9.1 Solidify your spiritual foundation

The foremost effort that will have the most impact on how you make it through your trial is solidifying your own spiritual foundation. Going for walks, chilling, doing distracting tasks such as baking or crafts can all be helpful. But the most valuable exercise that we can do is to learn more about God, to trust Him more, and to draw near to Him.

God is perfect in every way. We will never learn something about God that will cause us to pull away in disgust. Rather, everything that we learn about God, profound or small, will only increase our trust in Him.

Every thought that we have, every decision that we make, every response that we have will be based on what we believe. Even what we are ignorant of will have a determination in what choices we make because, if we had known what we don't, we might have made a different decision.

Someone who believes that the amount of money one has determines their own personal value will probably have a different view on cheating on their taxes than someone who firmly believes the Bible when it says, "Do not steal." (Luke 18:20)

Someone who believes that personal pleasure is the greatest goal to strive after will probably have a different view of cheating on their spouse than someone who firmly believes the Bible when it says, "Do not commit adultery." (Mark 10:19)

Our spiritual foundation helps us to make sense of what we are going through.

How do we solidify our spiritual foundation?

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9.1.1 We read and study our Bible

Why does the Bible even exist? It exists because God wants to communicate to us. He wants to make Himself known, to reveal Himself to us.

Through the Bible, we can learn about supernatural matters that our reasoning and imagination could never figure out. How could we know for certain about angels, Heaven, Hell, and the Second Coming? We can learn about God's character: that He is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal, merciful, loving, compassionate.

We can learn about blessings, promises, grace, and hope.

God gave us the Bible so that we can come into a relationship with Him.

The Bible is God's primary means of personal guidance and wisdom.

Read the Bible every day, even if it is just one chapter.

Reading the Bible will change us. But it is not a how-to manual. It is not a book of tips and tricks to get us through life's next obstacle. The purpose of the Bible is to transform us. It is to bring us to and make us more like Christ.

One great aid that I did for years was to keep a Bible notebook. This is a blank notebook and each day you write in it what you learned from the Bible. It does not have to be profound and the very great majority of the time it won't be. But at least it forces you to learn something. And, if you don't learn something, then keep reading or re-read that chapter until you do.

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Then take a step beyond that and study the Bible. The best way to do that is to pick a topic that interests you. That topic might be related to your suffering. Then, using a topical Bible or a concordance, look up every verse on that topic and put those thoughts together. Also, as you are reading your Bible every day, if there is a passage on your topic then write down your thoughts on that passage. Keep building on your study. It will get better and better as you go.

If you think that you will come through fire and floods by reading the Bible in bite-sized servings then you will be disappointed. You need to spend serious time reading it, thinking about it, applying it, studying it, memorizing it. Just digging into it. Ask, “What does this mean for me?” The Holy Spirit can make what you are reading apply specially to you. But only if you give Him the chance.

Three people may read the story of Jesus’ healing of Jairus’ daughter in Luke 8:40-56. If you are unfamiliar with the story, it that Jairus was an official of the synagogue and so probably not even a true believer in Christ. His twelve-year old daughter was dying. He came to Jesus and begged Him to come and heal his daughter. While Jesus was going with Jairus, a woman with a hemorrhage came to Jesus to be healed. But then someone came and said that the daughter had died and so not to bother Jesus anymore. But Jesus continued and when He got to the house He was laughed at. Never-the-less, Jesus went to the girl and gave her life.

One of those three people, read this story and the Holy Spirit used it to impress upon her to go to Jesus with her difficulties rather than trying to run from them or dousing them with alcohol and drugs.

For the second person, the Holy Spirit impressed upon him to not give up. Even when other issues and events get in the way like the woman with the hemorrhage in this story, keep pressing on. Jesus will not forget you. He will not be distracted.

For the third person, the Holy Spirit showed her that even when others laugh and mock their reliance on Jesus, God never laughs at them. And so do not be intimidated by scoffing of the world. God is really what matters the most.

But the fourth person who does not read their Bible, you know what the Holy Spirit taught them from this passage? Nothing.

Read, study, and meditate on your Bible every day. You might just be amazed at what God can teach you.

9.1.2 Attend church

If our Bible were all that we needed for a complete relationship with God, then He would not have created the church. The church is not an accessory.

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It is not the pickle on a hamburger platter.

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It is not the sprig of parsley on the linguine with clam sauce.

Here are some synonyms for church in the Bible.

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- Bride – Ephesians 5:22-23
- Jesus' body – Ephesians 1:23
- Flock – Acts 20:28
- Household of God – 1 Timothy 3:15

Notice the intimacy of these terms. The church is not an organization or a club. It is not a duty or an obligation. It is not where you dash in, sing a few songs, listen to a sermon, and then quickly dash out. The church is a community. It is a family. It is where you go to encourage others and to be healed yourself. To get counsel. To make friends.

Notice **Hebrews 10:24-25**

24 and let's consider how to encourage one another in love and good deeds, 25 not abandoning our own meeting together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

"Encourage" is mentioned twice. We come to church to be inspired and not just from the music or the teaching, but to be inspired by each other. To be given courage and confidence. We lose so much when we are not going to church.

9.1.3 Prayer

Spend time with God. Praise Him. Worship Him. Confess your sins to Him. Talk to Him. Tell Him what you think, how you feel. Try to establish a set time each day for prayer. Pray as much as you can.

Use common events or triggers to remind you to pray.

[Slide for each sentence]

Did the traffic light just turn red when you were hoping to make it through? Use that one minute to pray.

Mindlessly doing dishes? Instead pray.

Plotting your neighbor's death? Instead pray.

Philippians 4:6-7

6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Some say that this verse has the four main types of prayer:

- 1) Prayer
- 2) Supplication
- 3) Thanksgiving
- 4) Requests

But if you are feeling anxious, then God's remedy is to pray, pray, pray, pray.

There are many other activities that you can do to solidify your spiritual foundation: evangelize, serve, fast, and so on. But if you are consistent and deep in reading and studying your Bible, regularly attending church, and praying, you will develop a solid foundation.

9.2 Acknowledge your feelings

This is possibly one of the most important points.

Trying to ignore your grief is like trying to hold an inflated beach ball under water. It takes a lot of effort and, eventually, it will pop up anyway. But what it pops up as may be unexpected. Instead of popping up as sorrow:

- It may pop up as anger.
- It may pop up as addiction: drinking, pain killers, street drugs, binge eating, pornography.
- It may pop up as voluntary isolation.
- It may pop up as denial and lying to yourself.

They say that “Time heals all wounds.” (Unless, of course, you’ve been decapitated.) But suffering and grief will never just silently creep away on its own.

Avoiding the subject can lead to shame as though it is wrong, as Christians, to feel anything but joyful and happy. Grief and sorrow must be expressed. Healing won’t come if we deny our feelings.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her famous book “On Death and Dying” described the five stages of grief

- 1) We Deny – An inability to comprehend the loss
- 2) We are Angry – “This shouldn’t have happened.”
- 3) We Bargain – “If only...”
- 4) Depression – Realization and sadness
- 5) Acceptance – We start to heal

But what is missing here? What is not in this list? There is no place for grieving.

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In Luke 18, Jesus was passing a blind man on the side of the road. Jesus asked, “What do you want Me to do for you?” If the man flashed a big smile and said, “Nothing, I’m perfectly fine,” Jesus would have shrugged His shoulders and kept walking. Rather, the man said, “Lord, I want to regain my sight!” And Jesus healed him. He forthright acknowledged his pain and suffering. And Jesus responded to that honesty.

Be willing to let others around you know how you feel. But only tell those who will not compare or judge. If someone’s response is “You’ll get over it.” Or “Don’t worry about it.” Then move on. They will be of no help.

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Of course, do not make it your life mission to tell everyone that you meet what you are going through. Don’t turn other people into nothing more than a giant ear always eager, in your mind, to hear your travails. Not everyone wants to hear your life’s sorrows.

But true friends will. Merciful people will. Compassionate people will. But even then, only to a degree. Yes, you are going through a lot, but realize that other people may be having struggles also. Share your life, but don't overwhelm others with it. Be sensitive. Know when to stop, when to listen.

Realize that there is nothing wrong with you if you are grieving over a loss or suffering through a trial. When John the Baptist was killed, Jesus went off to be by Himself. We can grieve the Holy Spirit. Being dispassionate is not a godly characteristic. Putting on fake airs is not a godly characteristic.

If you are not yet able to honestly talk to other people about your feelings then write them down. You know that you can always tell them to God.

It is not a sign of spiritual, emotional, or psychological weakness to acknowledge that you are hurting. In fact, God honors this honesty by recording such feelings in the Psalms. The Psalms are there as examples to us. They are a model of how we can interact with God. And they provide a way for Christian communities to come alongside those who are hurting allowing us to empathize and enter into their sufferings. The Psalms are a great response to suffering.

Here are a few of them.

Psalm 6:2-3a

Be gracious to me, Lord, for I am frail; heal me, Lord, for my bones are horrified. And my soul is greatly horrified; but You, Lord—how long?

Bones denote the entire person right down to the innermost being. David, here, is in total agony. And he says what many of us say, "How long? How long, God, must I endure this?"

David continues this in verse 6

I am weary with my sighing; every night I make my bed swim, I flood my couch with my tears.

Picture this, David, the mighty king, is in so much agony that he cries every night. You picture him rolling back and forth on his bed, his hands pressing hard against his face in agony. His bed is wet with his tears. David, the king, the man who slew the giant Goliath did not find it beneath him to fervently express his sorrow.

Psalm 25:16-18

**16 Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.
17 The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses.
18 Look at my misery and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.**

In verse 16, that word "lonely" has the meaning of an isolated person, one who is a friendless wanderer or exile. It is not just that David felt like he was sitting in a dark room by himself, but, rather, that he felt like he was wandering with no direction and with no help. He was driven far from that which was familiar and comfortable. He was struggling, and he felt completely alone. He was saying, "Look at me! Look at me! I am miserable!" Can anyone here relate to that?

From the sons of Korah, Psalm 42:5

Why are you in despair, my soul? And why are you restless within me?

The word “despair” in the Hebrew has the sense of bowed down, of prostrating oneself, of being brought low. Their soul was so hurting, so burdened that it was like it is bent over in the dirt. The soul is someone’s emotions, personality, creativity, consciousness, mind, and desires. The word “soul” in the Greek is psyche. They were done. Their entire lives were bent over unable to stand upright.

One more, again the sons of Korah, Psalm 44:24-25

Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and oppression? For our souls have sunk down into the dust; our bodies cling to the earth.

Here that phrase “sunk down” has the meaning of melting away and vanishing. Think of how you might have been outside carrying a cup of water and then you trip or someone bumps you and that water splashes out of your cup and onto the ground. It spreads out then disappears into the dirt. That is how their soul felt. They felt so crushed, so defeated that their soul felt like it had disappeared into the dirt. They had nothing left.

We can see in just these four examples how different people in the Psalms did not hold back on how they felt. These were vivid pictures of people crushed, bowed down, gone. Just gone.

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They did not try to put a happy face on where they were at. They did not put on a forced smile and a “Praise the Lord, anyway.” They were honest with themselves, they were honest with others, and they were honest with God.

Suppose you did nothing all day long but complain to God. The first thing that you do when wake up is complain. Throughout the day you complain. And at night, just before you turn off the light you complain. What do you think God’s response would be? Would He turn you off? Rebuke you? Be annoyed with you?

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Here is **Psalm 55:17**

**Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur,
And He will hear my voice.**

What would God’s response be? He would listen to you.

Isn’t that amazing? We would walk away from that person. But God stays.

We would tune out that person. But God listens.

If you lie about and fake your emotions, then any solution will be attempting to remedy something that does not exist. Therefore, it will never work. But if you are honest, then any remedy will be aimed at what is really there. And then you can be healed.

Denying pain does not make you more spiritual. It is dishonest for Christians to hide our feelings. We, of all people, must be real. But even in our real pain we can always simultaneously have a real experience of God's presence and love.

9.3 Maintain your routines

When we are suffering, sometimes we can go into autopilot or shutdown altogether. But it is important to, as much as possible, maintain our routines. We find familiarity and comfort in the things that we know well and are used to.

Wake up at the usual time and do what you need to do. Eat at your usual times. Wash, clean, take care of things.

Routine is the skeleton that holds us together. Without it, we fall into a jumble of disorder and chaos and that only spirals us lower and lower.

We make a great number of decisions every day. When we are struggling, those decisions can overwhelm us and so we shut down. Setting and keeping to routines removes many of those decisions and, therefore, what decisions are left are more manageable.

For example, if you decide that for breakfast, on Mondays it will be oatmeal, Tuesday parfait, Wednesday eggs and so on, then when you get up in the morning you are not going, "I don't know what to eat" and then collapse into a depressed heap. Instead, you mechanically make your breakfast and that is taken care of. On to the next thing.

As sluggish and depressed as you may feel, force yourself to stay in your routines.

Also, while making decisions, realize that a "good enough" is oftentimes better than a "perfect" decision.

This is not to say that a badly thought-out and rushed decision is acceptable. But then neither is one that is time-consuming and exhausting.

A "good enough" decision is one that is thought-out but to the point where it meets your needs. And then you stop. If you want to buy a pair of earbuds, you do not necessarily have to do a spreadsheet on the top 100 sets with scored columns of pluses and minuses before you decide. You start at the top and once you find a pair that meets your needs, you buy them. Yes, there might be a pair further down that is very slightly better, but is that additional search worth your time?

Barry Schwartz who wrote "The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less" concluded that people who always need to make the "perfect" decision are:

- less satisfied with their lives
- less optimistic
- more depressed
- and have more regrets

They can more often have "analysis paralysis." They sometimes can't make a final decision because they are afraid that they will not make the best choice.

Do not be haphazard in your decision making, but be OK with making a choice that is “good enough” and then relax.

9.4 Find joy

It is important that we feel that our lives have meaning. But as Christians, we do not have to go out and find meaning in our lives. It has already been given to us by God. It is a matter of understanding it and applying it.

And realize that the meaning that we have is not temporary or shallow. It is eternal.

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Behind the mild-mannered and ordinary Clark Kent was the hero Superman. Clark Kent held a regular job. His clothes were commonplace. His life was nothing extraordinary. He was someone who was like 99% of the rest of the population. But Superman was different. He did great things. What he did made a huge difference. How many times he saved someone or even the world is countless. People would point at him in amazement and wished that they could be like him. One person but two entirely different worlds.

I am sure that the great majority of us feel more like Clark Kent. When we are out in public, no one points at us in amazement. We do not make the front of newspapers (or the internet). We are safely in the range of ordinary.

But, as born-again Christians, we actually are one person but two entirely different worlds. In this world, we probably are pretty commonplace. But in the supernatural world (“For our citizenship is in heaven” – Philippians 3:20), we are supermen and superwomen. What we do there makes a huge difference to a great many people. We can share the Gospel and someone can go from an eternity in Hell to an eternity in heaven! That is tremendous.

Or we can pray and something that might not normally occur does happen. It could be a healing, an encouragement, a job opportunity, a reconciliation.

What we can do as Christians are beyond superhero super-powers. Those powers are only momentary: see through walls, run fast, fly, lift heavy objects. What we can do as Christians is much greater. And it is for real! We can bless people with real joy, peace, and hope (Romans 15:13). Real wisdom is given to those who are confused and unsteady (James 1:5). Real angels rejoice when one sinner repents (Luke 15:10).

Use your supernatural powers and change the world for an eternity. This is real meaning.

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John Feinberg in his book “Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture” wrote, “If Scripture is, as evangelicals and their theology have affirmed throughout history, the very word of our almighty, omniscient, and all-loving God, then the only sane choice is to let it enlighten our thinking and our actions each and every day.”

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Create joy in small things. Joy just does not just come from the big things like weddings and anniversaries. It can also come in small ways. There are so many little things that bring joy into our lives.

We can do this by giving to others. It can be cooking someone their special meal or giving a one-minute back massage. It can be sending an email to a pastor or someone who volunteers at the church thanking them for their efforts.

And there is nothing wrong with doing something special for yourself either. Buying that special, expensive soap to shower with. Lighting a candle and reading your favorite author. Taking the dog for a walk at a different place.

Suffering does not have to define your every waking minute. You can let joy nose it's way in.

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Keep a gratitude journal. Each day write down three things that you were grateful for. Joy and gratitude go together and feed on one another. The more grateful you are, the more joyful you will be and the more joyful you are, the more grateful you will be.

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Avoid "killjoy thinking." This is when you look for the negative in an otherwise positive experience. For example, you are having a really nice meal but you keep focusing on the string beans being over cooked. Or you are at an interesting museum but you mention over and over how much money it cost for admission. Internet trolls have nothing to do but look for ways to tear down and criticize others. Don't be a life troll. Look for ways to build up yourself and others. That is way more satisfying.

If you are unable to recognize the good in your life, then you will be overwhelmed by the bad.

It is important to realize that if you have lost a loved one, you do not owe it to that person to live the rest of your life in sorrow or guilt. You are not disrespecting their memory by laughing or finding joy.

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When the rest of the world keeps going and moves from event to event, it may feel like the suffering person's life is stuck unmovable in that catastrophic event. It is as though your feet were pushed into cement at that one moment and then it hardened very quickly. And now you are stuck there, forever. You can never move on. That one disaster is where you will be for the rest of your life.

Yes, we should grieve. We should talk to friends and cry out to God. But eventually we need to pull our feet out of that cement and catch up with life. Will the grief and, now, cautiousness, ever go away? Maybe, but maybe not. But that grief should and will change. Instead of being stuck in that moment, we can now live in the present. See those around us. Notice, once again, that there is beauty in the world. That there is joy and that it is OK for us to participate in it. There will be times, at first maybe minutes, then later hours, maybe even nearly an entire day when we do not think about it. And, again, that is OK. That weight may never go away, but it does get lighter as time goes on. And that is good. That is right. We can, and should, celebrate events and holidays again. We can get out of bed. We can feel energy coming back into our bodies.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 tells us that there is “**A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance.**” Notice the order: weeping then laughing, mourning then dancing. Start to balance out the weeping and mourning with laughing and dancing.

It is not a betrayal to feel God’s joy once again. It is what God wants.

9.5 Take your grief to God

I once had bronchitis so I went to doctor.

Another time my car broke down so I took it to a mechanic.

My dog was limping badly so I brought her to a veterinarian.

In all of these situations, when something was broken, I knew that I lacked the skills to repair the damage so I went to an expert for healing.

Likewise, when we are broken, we should go to the best expert. There is no waiting room. No co-pay.

Philippians 4:6, “**Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**”

God is the expert. Not just in the big matters, but even in the small ones. What do we do? We talk to Him. We tell him what we think; what is going on. We be honest. If we are mad with God, then we tell Him so. He can handle it. He knows what we are thinking and how we feel anyway. It is not like we are going to pull the wool over His eyes. It’s not like He is going to be stunned by what we say. He won’t respond, “I never knew that!”

The Psalms are a great collection of chapters that pull us in deeply to what the writer was thinking or feeling. In many of the Psalms, the author pours out his heart. He shares his feelings both good and bad, uplifting and disturbing. But always honestly.

Studying the Psalms is a great way to see how other people have talked to God. And to see what conclusions they came to.

The Psalms can be put into categories. People will generally create anywhere from five to seven categories of Psalms. Here is a list utilizing seven categories in alphabetical order.

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- 1) Confidence/Trust
- 2) Kingship/Royal of both God and of a human king
- 3) Lamentation, sometimes further divided into personal and communal
- 4) Praise hymns
- 5) Remembrance
- 6) Thanksgiving
- 7) Wisdom

Of these seven categories, which one has the largest number of Psalms? It is Lamentation numbering about 1/3 of the Psalms.

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The writers of these lament psalms cover a number of topics.

- Abuse by enemies – Psalm 3
- God feeling distant – Psalm 13
- Sorrow – Psalm 137
- Feeling overwhelmed and helpless – Psalm 69
- Suffering – Psalm 22
- Isolation – Psalm 102
- Feeling vulnerable – Psalm 31
- Guilt – Psalm 32
- Feeling crushed and oppressed – Psalm 38
- Betrayal – Psalm 55
- A sense of injustice – Psalm 58
- Envy of the wicked and rich – Psalm 73
- Feeling needy – Psalm 86
- Disappointment – Psalm 74
- Depression/Discouragement – Psalm 88

You can verbalize your own psalm. All you have to do is talk to God. It doesn't have to be as eloquent as one of the Psalms. It just has to be honest and heart-felt.

Or choose an appropriate Psalm and substitute yourself for the psalmist. Make it you praying this to God instead of David or Asaph.

Go to a quiet place. Maybe go for a long walk. Talk to God. Be honest. If you have to, tell God that you are disappointed with Him. It's OK.

But at the end, thank God, praise God, tell God that, ultimately, you trust Him and that, together, you'll figure this thing out.

Psalm 13 is a good example of this.

**How long, Lord? Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
2 How long am I to feel anxious in my soul,
With grief in my heart all the day?
How long will my enemy be exalted over me?**

**3 Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;
Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
4 And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
And my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken.**

**5 But I have trusted in Your faithfulness;
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.**

**6 I will sing to the Lord,
Because He has looked after me.**

You can divide this Psalm into five sections.

Verse 1: Where are you God?

Verse 2: I am anxious and grieving

Verse 3: I don't know how much more I can take

Verse 4: I am being judged

Verses 5 and 6: Nevertheless, I trust, rejoice, and sing to You, God

Of all the Psalms of lament, every one ends on a positive note or has trust in God somewhere except for one—Psalm 88—a psalm from the sons of Korah. What does that mean? That we should always try to end our prayers on a positive note, but if we just can't, if we are just too broken, too confused, too crushed, then it is OK to end where we are. There will be other days, other times with God. God would rather hear an honest prayer that does not end on a high note, then one that is phony because you are trying to be something that you are not.

Lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. When we think of bringing our lament to God, we may think that we are doubting God, that we are challenging God, that we do not believe His promises and are not grateful. But lament is actually an act of worship because it is us coming to God knowing that He really does listen and care about us. It is us coming to a God who can fix things, who can bind up our wounds. Lament is coming with a heart that says, "God, You are good, so why is this happening?"

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The biggest lament in the Bible is the beginning of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Who spoke that? Was it a sinner who was rebelling against God? No. Those were the words that Jesus spoke on the cross (Mark 15:34). Jesus cried out to His Father in His greatest time of need. We can do that also. God wants us to do that.

There is much pain and confusion in the Psalms but it ends with Psalm 150 which is a psalm of pure praise.

I think that every instance of Jesus in heaven has Him seated on His throne except one instance. In Acts 7, Stephan was making his defense before the Sanhedrin and it was not very successful.

Then just before Stephan is stoned to death we read in verses 55-56

55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Jesus rises up from His throne to greet one of His children who was about to be martyred. This is how much God cares about each one of His children. He sees our suffering and He rises up.

Take your pain, your suffering, your sorrow, your depression to God. He is the expert. He makes room for those who are suffering.

9.6 Dealing with grief from the loss of a loved one

Be honest and open with your feelings. If you are not, then when they do bubble up to the surface, they may catch you unawares and you may say or do something that you regret such as snapping at another person.

Set up a plan to acknowledge your loss. Maybe on that person's birthday, light a candle and look at photographs of you both together. Learn to be grateful for what you had and not continually focus on what was lost. Involve others who want to participate, but don't force or nag someone to do it. Being with others can be a great comfort and bonding. But sometimes being alone may be just what you need at that moment.

Respect other people's feelings and how they grieve. Your way of grieving is not the way that everyone else should grieve. Some people are delayed grievers. They may not begin their grieving process until months later, maybe even a year later. Some cry hysterically. Some go off by themselves and be quiet.

Be compassionate with yourself. Acknowledge that you are hurting, that you need comfort, that you need to talk about it. Don't clam up and press on as though nothing happened. That can mean not forcing yourself to do things. If you are too sad to go to that get-together, then don't. But don't stay home if it just means that you are going to feel sorry for yourself and get further depressed.

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Don't put yourself into your own snow globe, never to get out and never to let anyone else in. Maybe compromise. Go to that get-together, but if you are feeling overwhelmed, then give yourself the right to leave.

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the American Psychiatric Association included a definition for "prolonged grief disorder." If an adult has at least three of the following symptoms for at least one year, or six months for a child or adolescent, after the loss of a loved one, then they have this diagnosis.

- Identity disruption (such as feeling as though part of oneself has died).
- Marked sense of disbelief about the death.
- Avoidance of reminders that the person is dead.
- Intense emotional pain (such as anger, bitterness, sorrow) related to the death.
- Difficulty with reintegration (such as problems engaging with friends, pursuing interests, planning for the future).
- Emotional numbness (absence or marked reduction of emotional experience).
- Feeling that life is meaningless.
- Intense loneliness (feeling alone or detached from others).

We are told to power through our grief, to get back into the swing of things. That is our culture.

But by understanding this diagnosis, it may help explain many of the symptoms that we are struggling with but cannot figure out why. This makes our grief visible. And for 7-10% of the population who have

lost a loved one, it tells us that it is a normal response to an abnormal occurrence. Our response should be to seek help. And other people's response to us is not to "suck it up" but of compassion. Profound loss will always leave us with a hole, but we can learn to be honest about it and be able to say, "No, at this moment, I am not fine." And even with that loss permanently attached to our lives, we can still integrate joy around it and lead a life that matters to ourselves and to others.

9.7 Dealing with pain

We must see past the way that we feel right now. Christianity gives us that hope.

When you feel dark and hopeless, realize that one day, you will, if you let yourself, feel better. Maybe not physically, but mentally. That does not mean that there won't be days when we slip back, and that is OK, but overall, we will get better and better.

Many times we see our lives as being too small. We don't realize the many people that we have an effect on albeit sometimes very small. The kind word that we said at the spur of the moment to a stranger might have been the most positive thing in their day.

Don't say that you are fine when you are not simply because you don't want to put other people in an awkward or uncomfortable situation or make them feel helpless because they don't know how to help you.

You say that you are fine to:

- Protect others
- Protect yourself

If you do not want to burden that person or to talk about it then you can reply, "I've had better days. But I'd rather not talk about this right now. How are you doing?"

Make time for joy. Go on that vacation; don't keep putting it off. If you don't have a lot of extra money then try an overnight vacation; maybe stay at a bed 'n breakfast. Or buy yourself that treat that you've been wanting. Maybe go to a bakery and get yourself that special pastry or cake that you like. Both plan joyful moments and also let them be spontaneous. The weather just broke. Get that special coffee drink that you like and go sit in a park. Relax. Be slow. Savor the moment.

You can allow and have moments of joy that break through that pain. Plan on them. Encourage others to help you find them.

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- Admit your pain
- Don't let the pain control you and take over
- Allow yourself moments of joy
- Be active in taking back control of your life

9.8 Don't lose sight of yourself by being a people-pleaser

What is a people-pleaser? It has two aspects.

- 1) We suppress our own needs, desires, expectations, feelings, and opinions.

- 2) We do this to either: gain attention, affection, validation, approval, and love or to avoid conflict, criticism, additional stress, disappointments, loss, rejection, and abandonment.

The problem with being a people-pleaser is that we lose parts of ourself in order to get someone to like us.

Several negative consequences are:

- 1) We neglect ourselves. Life is a balance. God created us to give to others and to care for others. But He also created us so that we have to take care of our own selves also. If we are primarily looking to please others then we will become exhausted and lose sight of what God wants to do in our own lives.
- 2) Anger and resentment. You can easily feel like people are always taking advantage of you. That people only care what they can get out of you rather than care about you.
- 3) Your worth is defined by what other people think of you rather than what God thinks of you. God becomes second place. We believe that only other people can fill our cup of proper self-worth and so we stop caring about what God thinks or wants. Therefore, we spend our time watching other people for cues as to how we should act or think rather than trusting the Bible to tell us these things.
- 4) We become consciously or unconsciously manipulative. We do what we can to get people to think about us the way that we want them to think about us.
- 5) We suppress our pain and suffering because we do not want people to feel uncomfortable around us. We become fake. We put on a phony smile. We try to cover-up what we are really going through. God wants us to be genuine.

Be confident in how God made you. You have specific gifts and talents that God has given to you. These fit you into the body of Christ, the church, like a specially cut piece of a puzzle.

If you see weaknesses in your life, work on strengthening them.

If you see sin in your life, focus on repentance.

Romans 14 is all about not doing things that will cause your brother or sister to stumble. We need to adjust ourselves so as to not hurt or tear down others. But in doing this, our reason must be to build them up and not because we want them to like us.

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Never take your eyes off of God because the eyes of others are more important.

9.9 Grief and the holidays

Grief can be particularly painful during the holidays or on anniversaries such as a birthday especially when it is the first one since the tragedy. The personal rituals that we carried out with those missing can be most difficult. These can be “grief triggers.”

Think ahead about these rituals. Are you able to still do them or would it be better to substitute something in its place? For example, if you always made a gingerbread house with that person, then this time maybe make cookies instead. You are not doing nothing and left facing an empty space, but you are not doing the exact same thing and thus reliving those still raw emotions.

Be willing to share your thoughts and feelings with someone else. Talking it out with someone may give you focus rather than having swirling thoughts going around and around without direction.

If you can handle it, then create a new ritual around that person who is gone. Share good memories, light a candle, bring out old photos.

Respect other people's struggles and means of coping. What you want to do or not do may not work for others. You do not want to make a gingerbread house like you used to do every year with your now deceased mother, but your sibling does. Compromise. Talk it out in a respectful manner. Try to understand others' points of view. Be willing to sacrifice when you are able. Maybe your sibling can make the gingerbread house and then take it to their house or room while you bake cookies. Do not force everyone to conform to you.

This is the first Christmas since your wife passed away. Your son does not want to put up a Christmas tree because he and mom used to decorate it every year. You want a Christmas tree because, otherwise, it seems like it will be a sham and joyless holiday. You talk it over and compromise. Instead of tree, maybe the two of you build your own unique Christmas display.

Do not fake it. Be honest with yourself and with others. You will get through things better when you are honest than if you bite your lip and try to "power through." If you try the latter, you will probably wind up exploding at some point and make it worse for everyone.

9.10 Suicide is never the answer

Sometimes we think that life is just too much. This pain may even go on for a while: months, maybe even years. We feel useless, unloved, hopeless. Maybe everyone would be better off without me.

Here are some things to consider.

9.10.1 This too shall pass

As much as you may hurt. For as long as it has gone on. And as much as you feel hopeless and that it will never get better. It can get better. Even if your pain is a chronic illness that you know won't go away or even if you are incurable and in hospice, you might be able to adjust your focus to the blessed hope of heaven that awaits you. To cherish each and every moment with your family and friends and see those moments of blessings.

So many people who considered suicide or attempted it, years later look back and are so glad that they made it through. Circumstances do change. We meet new people. We change towns. We get a new job. We learn to live with less money. We learn to forgive ourselves and others.

Seeds are dried and buried in the ground, but then they sprout up.

Moses, Joseph, Elijah, David, Peter, and the list goes on, all bottomed out. But eventually the tide turned.

Jesus was brutally murdered, but He rose from the dead.

Consider that some day in the future, you might feel much better. What is an impenetrable darkness now could easily lighten up. A change of circumstances. Some bright, unexpected surprise.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

16 Therefore we **do not lose heart**, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our **inner man is being renewed** day by day.

17 For **momentary, light affliction** is producing for us an **eternal weight of glory** far beyond all comparison,

18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are **temporal**, but the things which are not seen are **eternal**.

We “do not lose heart.” We do not give up. This ties back to verse 1 of this chapter.

2 Corinthians 4:1, “Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, **we do not lose heart...**”

Why don’t we lose heart? Paul gives us two reasons in verse 1. 1) “We have this ministry.” What ministry is he talking about? Notice that the verse starts with “Therefore.” That means that it is building on something. There is a cause and effect. The effect here is that we have a ministry. What is the cause? For that we go back a verse to chapter 3 verse 18:

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

The cause is our transformation. Transformed from what? From “glory to glory” more and more into the image of Christ. Read those two verses next to each other.

**But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.
Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart,**

Your ministry is that you are being transformed more and more into the glory of the Lord. And what is the Lord’s glory? Drawing people to Himself. Compassion. Forgiveness. Love. Joy. All those same things are our ministry. You matter! You can have a great and eternal influence on other people.

But this transformation does not just happen automatically. You do not go to sleep and then when you wake up the next morning you shout, “Wow, I feel more like the glory of Christ than I did eight hours ago.” No, you are transformed by obeying God and by doing what God wants you to do. It is what Micah 6:8 says:

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?

You are not stuck in one place with no hope of change. You have the hope—the promise—of glory.

The second reason to not lose hope is God’s mercy. We all make mistakes, we blow it, we sin, but God is merciful. Mercy is not getting the judgment that we deserve for doing wrong. God is not going to grind us down every time that we sin.

So we see here two sides. One is that God wants to transform us into someone better and second is that God will not necessarily punish us when we blow it. And because of those two reasons, we should not lose heart.

Back to 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Our physical bodies may be falling apart and failing us, but our inner man (our spiritual man) does not have to follow suit. It can be renewed. We can have hope. Hope in what? Knowing that what awaits us on the other side is rich and glorious beyond what we can ask or think.

Our affliction here and now may seem weighty, but it is really momentary and light compared to the eternal weight of glory that is coming.

I shared this story before, but I'll mention it briefly again because it so applies. At one time in Israel the spiritual atmosphere was quite bleak. The current high priest, Eli, was lazy and callous. The nation's future spiritual leaders, Eli's sons, were cheaters and disrespectful of the ways of God. The situation was reason for good people to despair. What they did not know was that there was a boy named Samuel whom God was preparing to be a righteous advocate for His people. Samuel would bring back a holy reverence for God and lead Israel in justice and truth. However, it would take nine years for this to come about.

Many times in our lives our situation looks bleak and not just the present but also for as far into the future as we can see. We are tempted to despair. Some even fall away because God seems unconcerned and they have lost hope. But what we do not know is what God is preparing. We need to wait patiently for God and at the proper time He will provide a "Samuel" for us. This "Samuel" may be a person, a turn of events, emotional or physical healing, or something else. In the meantime, we must do what is right and let God rule.

This too shall pass.

9.10.2 Your loss would greatly affect others

Yes, when you are deeply struggling and in great pain--emotional, physical—and feel utterly hopeless, realize that there are people around you who care even if it is the person on the other end of the suicide hotline. You have a support system. Use it.

Think about how broken your family will be seeing you dead. How they will think about it every day for the rest of their lives. If you do not think that your family will severely grieve your death, then your view is narrow. If you care about others then you will want the best for them and their suffering from your loss is cruel and misses how much you really do matter.

The main character in Simone de Beauvoir's (Sa-moan de Bu-voir) book "The Mandarins" felt that the world had become empty. She said, "The earth is frozen over; nothingness has reclaimed it." Her love affair had ended, her daughter was distant, and nothing in life was satisfying. Her life had become suffering and pain. Suicide seemed the best solution. A moment before drinking the bottle of poison she heard her daughter's voice. This shocked her into realizing the effect that her death would have on other people.

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She said, "My death does not belong to me... it's the others who would live my death."

And how true that is. Those contemplating suicide rarely consider the multiplied anguish that their death would cause others. I knew two people who committed suicide. I didn't know them well, but even decades later, they occasionally come to mind. What went so wrong that they did that? Whenever I think about them, I feel bad and I sometimes wonder if I could have done something to help.

9.10.3 No pain, no hurt, no humiliation, no betrayal is so deep that it cannot be overcome
Several people in the Bible and great Christians struggled with depression, but, by God's grace, they not just outlasted it but triumphed over it.

Let's briefly look at six of them.

9.10.3.1 Job

Job was the first book in the Bible that was written. What was it about? Suffering. Loss. Anguish. Accusations. Considering this world, it seems fitting that the first book that God chose to have written was on these subjects.

Job was a righteous man who feared God. He was doing well. But then in one day it was all gone. He lost his children. He lost all of his animals, i.e. his livelihood. He lost his health.

Here are some of his words.

3:1 "May the day on which I was to be born perish..."

3:11, ""Why did I not die at birth, come out of the womb and pass away?"

3:20-21a ""Why is light given to one burdened with grief, and life to the bitter of soul, who long for death, but there is none..."

3:24-26, "For my groaning comes at the sight of my food, and my cries pour out like water. For what I fear comes upon me, and what I dread encounters me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet, and I am not at rest, but turmoil comes."

30:16-21, "And now my soul is poured out within me; days of misery have seized me. At night it pierces my bones within me, and my gnawing pains do not rest. By a great force my garment is distorted; it ties me up like the collar of my coat. He has thrown me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry out to You for help, but You do not answer me; I stand up, and You turn Your attention against me. You have become cruel to me; with the strength of Your hand You persecute me."

But Job hung in there. He even challenged God. And God basically told him, "Who are you to question Me?"

What turned Job around? It wasn't that he finally understood why he was suffering. It wasn't even that his suffering went away. That came later. It was when he finally understood God's character. And once he truly understood who God was, then he made that pivot. The scales tipped the other way.

I think the pivot verse in the book of Job is chapter 42 verse 5:

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You;

In the beginning of the book, we read how righteous and God-fearing Job was. But even then, God was distant, more knowledge than relationship. But after coming to an understanding of God's character and His sovereignty, Job said that his "eye sees You." It was now more relationship than knowledge. And that changed everything.

In the end, Job drew closer to God and he wound up with twice as many livestock and had more sons and daughters.

Job triumphed.

9.10.3.2 Elijah

Elijah was a prophet used greatly by God. But then Jezebel threatened Elijah and Elijah crashed. He said in 1 Kings 19:4, **“Enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.”** For all of the great feats that Elijah accomplished, it took only one threat to bring him down.

But then he was strengthened by God and went on to do even greater miracles.

Elijah triumphed.

9.10.3.3 Jeremiah

Jeremiah was a major prophet of God. He was called to deliver a message to all of Israel. Yet he struggled with loneliness and depression. He wrote the Book of Lamentations.

Jeremiah 20:14, “Cursed be the day when I was born; may the day when my mother gave birth to me not be blessed!”

20:18, “Why did I ever come out of the womb to look at trouble and sorrow, so that my days have been spent in shame?”

But Jeremiah kept his spiritual strength. And in one of the last recorded conversations that God has with Jeremiah, God says, **“For I will assuredly rescue you, and you will not fall by the sword; but you will have your own life as plunder, because you have trusted in Me,” declares the Lord.** – Jeremiah 39:18

Even through all of his loneliness, through all of his depression, he always trusted God. And, in the end, that brought him through.

Jeremiah triumphed.

9.10.3.4 David

King David had many struggles in his life. We read his thoughts in the Psalms.

13:1-2, “How long, Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long am I to feel anxious in my soul, with grief in my heart all the day?”

18:4-5, “The ropes of death encompassed me, and the torrents of destruction terrified me. The ropes of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me.”

42:5, “Why are you in despair, my soul? And why are you restless within me?”

Then read Psalm 145. It is the last Psalm written by David—at least numerically. Here are the final words in verse 21.

**My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
And all flesh will bless His holy name forever and ever.**

This is someone who struggled with every trial and temptation imaginable: death of his child, death of his best friend, driven away by enemies, betrayal by his own son, and on and on. But he stayed the

course. He looked to God. And in the end, his words were not regarding victimhood. They were not about his regrets and losses. Rather, they were praising God for who He is.

David triumphed.

9.10.3.5 Moses

Moses certainly had his struggles and trials.

We read in Numbers 11:14-15 how he had given up on life. His burdens had become too great and he was miserable.

“I am not able to carry all this people by myself, because it is too burdensome for me. 15 So if You are going to deal with me this way, please kill me now, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my misery.”

But in Hebrews 11:24-29 we see why Moses persevered.

24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, 25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the temporary pleasures of sin,

Moses chose ill-treatment, inconvenience, and sacrifice rather than sin.

26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

Moses fixed his eyes on the eternal: the reward.

27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he persevered, as though seeing Him who is unseen.

Moses persevered by looking to God. He chose the eternal yet unseen over the momentary and immediate.

28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch them.

Moses obeyed God.

29 By faith they passed through the Red Sea as through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

Moses followed God’s leading no matter how scary it seemed.

Moses triumphed.

They were all prophets. They had a special connection to God. But they had had enough. They were worn down. Life had thrown too many struggles, too many trials, too much suffering their way. They just wanted it to be over. In all five of these cases, these great men did not want to go on.

But rather than honor their desires, God, instead, ministered to them and gave them hope. They overcame their depression and struggles and, eventually, they were all used greatly by God. The key? They did not ultimately give up even as much as they wanted to. And they went on to lead fulfilled lives.

Let's look at the final example.

9.10.3.6 Charles Spurgeon – Do not read his name

Here are some quotes from one of the greatest Christians. See if you can guess who it is.

"I pity a dog who has to suffer what I have."

"The mind can descend far lower than the body, for it, there are bottomless pits. The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul can bleed in ten thousand ways, and die over and over again each hour."

"There are dungeons beneath the Castle of Despair as dreary as the abodes of the lost, and some of us have been in them"

"This loneliness, which if I mistake not is felt by many of my brethren, is a fertile source of depression."

And finally,

"I often wonder, to this day, how it was that my hand was kept from rending my own body in pieces through the awful agony which I felt when I discovered the greatness of my transgression."

Do you know who this was?

Charles H. Spurgeon.

It is estimated that he spoke to over 10 million people in his lifetime. His 3,561 sermons are contained in a 63-volume set. He was called the "Prince of Preachers."

Yet he suffered from terrible depression.

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Much of it started after October 19, 1856. Surrey Gardens Music Hall was a three-story building that held around 12,000 people. When Spurgeon was still in his early twenties, in his first sermon there, before the service had even begun, someone who wished to disrupt Spurgeon's sermon, shouted "fire." In the stampede to get out, seven people were crushed to death and many others hurt.

Years later, Spurgeon said this horrifying incident took him "near the burning furnace of insanity." His wife, Susannah, wrote, "My beloved's anguish was so deep and violent, that reason seemed to totter in her throne, and we sometimes feared that he would never preach again."

But this man who once wrote, "I could say with Job, 'My soul chooses strangling rather than life.' I could readily enough have laid violent hands upon myself to escape from my misery of spirit" did preach again and, in fact, used his experience with depression to glorify God.

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Spurgeon turned to the sovereignty of God knowing that He can comfort anyone regardless of their emotional state. He said, “the sympathy of Jesus is the next most precious thing to his sacrifice.” In an 1890 sermon, “The Tenderness of Jesus,” he spoke about how Christ, as our High Priest, feels for us in our infirmities.

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He wrote, “This morning, being myself more than usually compassed with infirmities, I desire to speak, as a weak and suffering preacher, of that High Priest who is full of compassion: and my longing is that any who are low in spirit, faint, despondent, and even out of the way, may take heart to approach the Lord Jesus.”

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Spurgeon wrote: “I believe all the promises of God, but many of them I have personally tried and proved. ... I would say to [fellow Christians] in their trials—My brethren, God is good. He will not forsake you: He will bear you through. ... Everything else will fail, but His word never will.”

Spurgeon believed that even when we are smothered by darkness, when pain and confusion follow us everywhere, that we must cling to God’s promises even if we barely have the strength to hold on. They are a rock even when our feelings are slippery. We belong to Christ. He is our anchor.

Spurgeon triumphed.

When we feel alone and hopeless with no end in sight:

[Slide with each bullet point]

- We persevere because there is still so much beauty in this world to experience.
- We persevere because there are unborn nieces, nephews, grandchildren yet to love.
- We persevere because we have unique talents to grow and share.
- We persevere because there are other people who want us to live and for us to live for.
- We persevere because there is something that we can create that doesn’t exist yet.
- We persevere because we don’t want our story to be that we couldn’t handle it; we have a better story to tell.
- We persevere because through our perseverance, we can give hope to others.
- We persevere because there is great music, great books, great movies that we have yet to experience.
- We persevere because we can become someone better.
- We persevere because God will never leave us nor forsake us.
- We persevere because God gives us hope.

9.11 Do not dwell on the negative

When we are suffering, we can easily dwell on the negative.

Why me? What have I done to deserve this?

Look at all of the things that I am missing because of this suffering.

- I can't go on a vacation because I lost my job and finances are tight.
- I have a hard time reading my Bible or focusing while at church because all that I can think about is my horrible situation.
- My relationships are falling apart because all that I can talk about is myself and my agonizing life.
- I must be a really bad person because other people aren't having the same problems that I have.

Rather, focus on moving forward. How?

1) Be grateful

Research has found that being grateful increases our levels of dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin. These are feel-good neurochemicals. Why take drugs to be happy? Be grateful instead. It's cheaper and its side effects are that other people are happy, too.

Two psychologists, Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis, and Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami, have done much on the research on gratitude. In one study, they asked all participants to write a few sentences each week, focusing on particular topics.

One group wrote about things they were grateful for that had occurred during the week. A second group wrote about daily irritations or things that had displeased them, and the third wrote about events that had affected them (with no emphasis on them being positive or negative). After 10 weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt better about their lives.

Being grateful calms the nervous system which then calms the body.

What are some benefits of being grateful?

a) Gratitude reduces depression

A review of 70 studies that include responses from more than 26,000 people found an association between higher levels of gratitude and lower levels of depression.

b) Gratitude gives us greater satisfaction in life

You are focusing more on the ways in which God has blessed you rather than on the ways that the world has cut you down.

c) Gratitude gives us a more proper self-esteem

Your self-esteem comes from what God says about you, rather than the way the world degrades you. God says that you are glorious and a child of His. The world tells you that you are worthless and ugly. Who is more correct? Who should you be listening to?

d) Gratitude holds on to the positive longer

We can too easily and too often hold onto slights, betrayals, and offenses for decades. They fester and become resentments and bitterness. We become the person who criticizes everything and those who look for the worst in everything. We focus on our headwinds; those obstacles that hit us as we try to move forward. When we have this attitude, good things last as long as an egg cracked into a non-stick pan that is then turned sideways. It quickly slides off and is gone.

Gratitude keeps the pan level so that we enjoy that egg longer. It keeps that good thing fresh and crowds out the negative. We focus on our tailwinds; those are the benefits that we have received.

e) Gratitude builds stronger social relationships

Who wants to hang around a complainer, someone who finds something wrong with everything? Be a Barnabas, a son of encouragement (Acts 4:36). Then people will want to hang around you because you will make them feel better.

Maya Angelou said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

f) Gratitude increases feelings of security and connectedness

We see that not all is terrible. That some people are kind. We diminish that sense of paranoia; that everyone and everything is out to get us. We draw closer to God and feel safe knowing that He is our rock and fortress.

g) Gratitude produces less anxiety

Anxiety usually comes from dwelling on the negative. Often it is thinking about the bad things that have happened and the bad things that may happen. Anxiety worries about what we might lose, what people will think.

Being grateful focuses on the good that you have now and not on the bad that "may" happen in the future.

Gratitude produces contentment. Contentment is making the most of what you currently have.

Philippians 4:11-12

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

1 Timothy 6:8

But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

Hebrews 13:5

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

We have looked at why we should be grateful, now let's look at how to be more grateful.

[Slide for each]

- 1) Keep a gratitude journal. Buy a blank notebook or a calendar. Each day write down at least one thing that you were grateful for. It could even be something routine such as “I am grateful that I had three meals today.” Or, “I am grateful that my refrigerator worked today.” Try being grateful for three things a day for 30 days and see what happens.
- 2) When something good happens, thank God for it even if it is small. “Thank you, God, that I made it through that green light.” “Thank you, God, that I can afford to buy food today.” “Thank you, God, that I have a good church to go to.” “Thank you, God, that my Sunday School teacher is the best.”
- 3) Tell someone why you are grateful for something that they said or did. “Thank you for cooking dinner tonight. It was good.” “Thank you for driving the girls to soccer practice today.” “Thank you for the sermon that you preached today.”
- 4) Show yourself compassion.

Instead of beating yourself up, do something kind for yourself.

- Go to a spa.
- Go to that bakery, coffee shop, or ice cream place and get your favorite treat.
- Buy yourself that special something that you’ve always wanted even though you don’t “need” it.

5) Find meaning

Yes, you are going through a hard time. Find someone else who is also struggling and go to them. Listen to them. Comfort and encourage them. Share your story with them. Tell them that they are not alone.

- Go to a nursing home and spend some time with someone there.
- Help out at a food pantry.
- Serve at your church.

6) Make plans

These do not have to be related to what you are going through.

- Plan to do an in-depth Bible study on that topic that you have always been interested in.
- Plan a vacation. It does not have to be expensive.
- Start a new hobby.
- Create a prayer book and pray at a good and consistent time each day.
- Visit an old friend that you have not seen in years and who might live a ways away.
- Plan a really nice meal and have someone over for dinner whom you have never had over before.

Ultimately, do not stew in your own self-pity. That will get you nowhere but further down. You may not feel like it, but you are blessed. Focus on that.

9.12 Take care of your physical needs

Get enough sleep. If you have trouble falling asleep, then get off of your devices at least two hours before bed. Read a book instead. Read the Bible just before you go to bed.

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Eat well, preferably plenty of fruit and vegetables. Eat three meals a day. Do not rush through your meals. Relax and enjoy. Do not chow down on potato chips and ice cream for your meals. That might taste good at the moment, but in the long run, you will feel worse.

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Exercise. If you did not exercise before your trial then start. When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins. Endorphins cause a positive reaction in your body. They also diminish the perception of pain, sort-of like a sedative.

Exercise also:

- Reduces stress
- Diminishes anxiety and feelings of depression
- Boosts self-esteem
- Improves sleep
- Strengthens the heart
- Increases energy levels
- Lowers blood pressure

9.13 God's grace will bring you through this

Corrie Ten Boom, the author of "The Hiding Place," wrote, "There is no pit so deep but He is not deeper still."

C.S. Lewis in "The Problem of Pain" said, "Nor have I anything to offer my readers except my convictions that when pain is to be born, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all."

Isaiah 57:15

**For this is what the high and exalted One
Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, says:
"I dwell in a high and holy place,**

Notice the words used here to describe God.

"High"

"Exalted"

"Lives forever"

"Holy"

These are all powerful words. This description of God does not likely cause us to want to snuggle up to Him. Instead, it more likely causes us to fall back and shield ourselves in fear and reverence. This is a God of authority, of supremacy. You expect the following verses to be about how this consuming God destroys the wicked and with great retribution crushes the enemies of His people. This is what a high, exalted, eternal, and holy God does. There is no love and mercy here.

But then read the rest of the verse.

**And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly
And to revive the heart of the contrite.**

Whoa! This high, exalted, eternal, and holy God dwells with the contrite and lowly? He revives the lowly? Yes! We are revived, we are sustained, we are lifted up by a great and powerful God.

Our hope may not end with healing from a terminal illness, but no matter what happens here, there is always the blessed assurance of glory and full healing in heaven. God may heal some people here and He may not heal some people here. But God will ALWAYS bring His children to heaven in the end. That is one hope sure to come to pass.

In the book of Daniel, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar set up an image of gold and required the people to bow down and worship it. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego refused to bow down. Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage and threatened to throw the three into a fiery furnace. Daniel 3:17-18 records their response.

“If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Notice what they basically say, “Our God will deliver us, but even if He does not, we will still serve and trust Him.”

God never makes an absolute promise that He will completely reverse the current trial that we are going through while we are on the earth.

But with God, there is always hope. There is always grace God will be sufficient. And we definitely know, that ultimately we will find eternal healing, peace, and glory.

9.14 You are not trapped by your past

Ezekiel 18 tells us about a father who:

- Practiced extortion
- Was a thief
- And was not good

But his son did what was right. He did not follow in his father’s footsteps. He did not blame his bad influences. Rather, he did what was right and, consequently, he did not suffer for his father’s guilt.

We do not have to be trapped by our past. 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us, **“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”** No matter how scarred our past, no matter how terrible we have been, no matter what addiction has tightly gripped our life, we can start fresh. We can have a new heart. We can have a new beginning.

Philippians 3:13-14 tells us how.

Brothers and sisters, I do not regard myself as having taken hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Do you want to forget what happened in your past? Then reach forward to what lies ahead. Press on toward the goal.

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How do you forget things in your past that depress and weigh you down? Reach forward to what lies ahead. Press on to God. Look through the windshield and not focus on the rearview mirror. That is why the windshield is so much bigger. It is because that is where you should be looking most of the time. Leave the dirt and the mud behind and press on to the glory that is ahead.

That word “reach” in “and reaching forward to what lies ahead” in the Greek has the sense of to “stretch out to.” It is as if something is holding you back, but you are doing everything that you can to stretch forward—fighting, fighting, fighting, intensely straining to get what you want.

And ‘press’ as in “I press on toward the goal” actually means to “to run swiftly in order to catch some person or thing.” It has the connotation of a hunter relentlessly pursuing a catch or a prize.

Notice that this is not necessarily simple and easy. You do not get saved and all of your scars and addictions marvelously melt away. The shackles just fall off and you are completely free. That may happen, but more often than not, it is going to take work. But you have some great advantages. One, you have the community of the church behind you. Second, you have the grace of God supporting and encouraging you. And, third, you have a clear and confident goal in front of you—the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

You can be free.

9.15 Use your own suffering as a means to comfort others.

Henri Nouwen (en-ree know-en) wrote:

Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 is a key verse on this topic:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. 6 But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; 7 and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are partners in our sufferings, so also you are in our comfort.

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This passage sets forth a dynamic: God comforts us, and we, then, can comfort others.

But as with most of the Bible, there is a foundation for what is written. The writers just do not pull promises and opinions out of thin air hoping for the best. Rather, they build on a foundation. A foundation that we can trust because it is unchanging, sufficient, and loving.

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For this passage, the foundation of comfort is the three ways in which God is described:

- 1) The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
- 2) The Father of mercies
- 3) The God of all comfort

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1) The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...” John 3:16

God gave, as a sacrifice, His only Son so that we can be forgiven of our sins and be in a safe and right relationship with Him. This is a foundation of love and sacrifice.

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2) The Father of mercies. Mercy is applied when we do something wrong that deserves punishment, but God does not punish us. Sometimes we deserve that trial because it is the result of something that we have done that is bad. So instead of extending or worsening the trial, God does not give us what we deserve, but, instead, gives us mercy. This is a foundation of compassion.

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3) The God of all comfort. This is the opposite side of the coin from the Father of mercies. Mercy is God not giving us the bad that we deserve. Comfort is God giving us the good that we do not deserve. Comfort is healing. It is giving hope. It is listening. It is understanding. This is a foundation of support.

Our foundation for comfort both in receiving and giving is a God of love, sacrifice, compassion, and support. This is what we build on. This is our example.

Notice that as with so many other things (forgiveness for example), God gives us in abundance and asks us to give at least a little in return. “Who comforts us in all our affliction.” “So that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.” We get all from God so that we can give any to others.

God gives us an ocean of comfort and only asks that we give at least a glass of comfort to others.

Our suffering is not there so that we can be an attention hog. “Oh, look at how bad I have it. You just can’t understand how terrible I have it.” Rather, one reason for our suffering is so that we can comfort others. “I can relate to what you are going through. Do you want to tell me about it?”

- Who better to comfort someone who has lost a spouse then someone who has also lost a spouse?
- Who better to comfort someone who has cancer then someone who has also had cancer?
- Who better to comfort someone who lost their job and is in financial straits then someone who has also lost their job and has struggled financially?

This means going to that person and telling them what happened to you and if they want to talk to someone who understands then you are there for them. Also, you might better know what needs they have right now because you have been there and so can initiate meeting those needs.

Another key section is in **Isaiah 58**.

**7 Is it not to break your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
8 Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will spring up quickly;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.**

**10 And if you offer yourself to the hungry
And satisfy the need of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness,
And your gloom will become like midday.
11 And the Lord will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.
12 Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins;
You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach,
The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.**

There are three stages here.

Stage 1 - From verses 8, 11, and 12 – The stage of suffering

- We are in darkness
- We are sick, wounded, in distress
- We are in a scorched place
- We are weak
- We are dry and thirsty
- We are in ruins

Stage 2 - From verses 7 and 10 – The stage of giving

- We feed the hungry; i.e. the poor, the incapable
- We give shelter to the homeless; i.e. those who have lost their way
- We cover those without clothes; i.e. the vulnerable
- We support and encourage the afflicted and oppressed

Notice that we are not just serving, but giving to those who are likewise suffering.

Stage 3 – From verses 8, 10, 11, 12 – The stage of resurrection

- Our light will break out from the darkness
- We will recover
- Righteousness will go before us; i.e. we will be led down the path to think and do what is right
- God will be our rear guard; i.e. God will protect us from the regrets and destruction of our past
- Our gloom will be turned into warmth and light
- We will be strengthened
- We will be refreshed and feel like we can bear fruit again
- Our lives will be rebuilt
- We will no longer feel unstable and shaky, but will feel like we are standing on a solid foundation

This is the result of our giving to others: recovery, restoration, resurrection.

Now, of course, the one and only solution to all suffering is not necessarily serving others. This is not saying that if you lose a child today that you should go serve in a soup kitchen tomorrow and all of your grief will disappear.

But it is saying that sometimes we prolong or intensify our suffering by spending far too much time focusing on ourselves, on our problems and how they have brought us down. By changing our focus to serving others who are also hurting, we, by God's grace, will feel a purpose and joy that we might have pushed out of our lives.

2 Corinthians 7:5-7

5 For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts on the outside, fears inside. 6 But God, who comforts the discouraged, comforted us by the arrival of Titus; 7 and not only by his arrival, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted among you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.

Here Paul and his companions were afflicted on every side. They had conflicts coming from the outside. They had fears on the inside.

But God comforted him. How? By sending Titus. God will often, if not mostly, work through others.

Are you a Titus? Is God sending you to comfort someone? Are you obeying God and going to that person or are you making excuses? You may not be a skilled counselor but you do not have to be. Do what you can. Cook them a meal. Bring them something that they like. Just sit and listen. You may think that you can only do little things, but those little things matter. They matter a great deal. But remember that you

are not doing this alone. God has comforted you so that you, with God, can comfort others. You are an agent of redeeming, of healing, of renewal. Be a Titus. Go.

9.16 Look to the final Blessed Hope

Yes, this life can be crushing. As Thomas Hobbes wrote in 1651, “the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

But we, as Christians know, this life isn’t the be-all-end-all. There is more. And that more, if you are born-again as it says in John 3, is glorious and pain free and forever beautiful.

Titus 2:13, “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus...”

The “blessed hope” when we will see God face-to-face and live eternally in His presence.

they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illuminate them; and they will reign forever and ever. – Revelation 22:4-5

A Biblical principle in Luke 7:47, “her many sins have been forgiven; that’s why she loved much,” can be applied here. The more broken and tragic your life is here; the more glorious and splendid heaven will be.

This is indeed something to look forward to. Knowing that our life here is but a vapor, but our life in heaven is forever.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

When Jesus walked the Earth some of the lame could walk, some of the blind could see. In heaven, all of the lame will walk, all of the blind will see.

The song “There is a Redeemer” ends with “When I stand in glory, I will see His face, and there I’ll serve my King forever, in that Holy Place.”

9.17 Perhaps seek professional help

Sometimes our problems and suffering fog our minds too much to think clearly. Or the scars are too deep to easily dig out.

There are times when we need to seek professional help. That could mean seeing a professional, Biblical counselor or perhaps seeing a counselor in your own church if they have one. This is perfectly acceptable and maybe even necessary.

Proverbs 11:14 tells us, “Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in an abundance of counselors there is victory.”

There are many men and women who have spent years studying the Bible in how to deal with a variety of troubling situations. They probably have counseled many, many people and have a great amount of

wisdom and experience to share. These people can be a great help in cutting to the heart of the matter and providing expert advice in resolving your situation.

Take advantage of the wisdom that these people can offer.

9.18 Realize that you are worth being victorious

Listen to what Ephesians tells us we are or have.

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Chapter 1

3: blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places

4: holy and blameless

5: predestined us to adoption

6: His grace, which He freely bestowed on us

7: redemption

7: forgiveness

9: made known to us the mystery of His will

11: obtained an inheritance

12: the first to hope

13: sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise

17: spirit of wisdom

18: know what is the hope of His calling

18: riches of the glory of His inheritance

19: the surpassing greatness of His power toward us

And that is just chapter 1.

Chapter 2 tells us that we are “made us alive together with Christ,” “raised us up with Him,” “seated us with Him in the heavenly places” and much more.

Does that sound like a defeated and unworthy person?

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What is God like? Here are some things. God is:

1. Holy
2. Forgiving
3. Patient
4. Merciful

5. Loving
6. Joyful
7. Kind
8. Faithful
9. Just
10. Creative

Those are just ten characteristics of God. Pretty good, aren't they?

Genesis 1:27, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." We are made in the image of God. But you may say, "That verse was describing us before the Fall of man so are fallen people still in the image of God?" Yes. James 3:9 states, **"With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God."**

What does it mean to be made in God's image?

God did not create us to merely reflect who He is. We are more than mirrors. God created us in His image. That does not mean that we are little gods, but that God has formed us with many of His own characteristics such as the ten that are mentioned above. That is one reason why people are worth more than all other of God's created creatures. That gives us tremendous permanent value.

We should not be defined by our trials and suffering; we should be defined by how God has made us in His image.

1 Peter 4:10 tells us, **"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."**

You are not just another run-of-the-mill person. God has given you a special gift. Each one of you, if you are born-again, already have this special gift. Use it. Be special.

Colossians 2:6 says, **"Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him."**

Another way of saying that is to become in reality what you already are in Christ Jesus. Do not let the suffering drag you down. Rather, use what God has given to you to lift yourself up.

Studies have shown that having a wrong self-image is a risk factor for victimization.

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A lowered self-image sees us as dull and worthless. A God centered self-image sees us as having dignity and tremendous value and worth.

An inflated self-image sees us being arrogant and independent. A God centered self-image sees us as sinners who need the grace and mercy of a Savior.

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When we have a wrong self-image, we are trying to be how we want others to see us.

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When we have a correct self-image, we see ourselves as God actually sees us. The first is artificial. The second is true.

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A wrong self-image is self's view of self; a right self-image is God's view of self.

Stop negative self-talk. Negative self-talk is anti-hope. It makes our lives harder than they need to be. We all have flaws. We are all sinners. We are all struggling through life. You do not have to be perfect to be lovable or worthy.

An easy life does not mean that you are a better person. And, likewise, a tortured life does not mean that you are less than others.

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We are never defeated until we give up on God.

You are worth having a life of victory. Do not give in to defeat. Keep pressing on.

9.19 How should we respond to our own suffering conclusion

Here we looked at 18 ways to properly respond to our own suffering. How to think properly and how to respond properly.

Yes, when you have that late-stage terminal illness, when you have lost someone close to you, it is not easy. That pain may never go away. But with a God who **“heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds”** (Psalm 147:3) we can do more than endure. We can find comfort, support, and even joy. Let God be God and let Him and His church be your fortress and foundation.

10 How should we respond to other people's suffering?

10.1 The importance of presence

We know how much Job suffered and that his three friends came to comfort him. For 22 chapters they try to rationalize and explain Job's suffering. But perhaps only one verse demonstrated the best comfort that they provided for him.

Job 2:11-13

11 Now when Job's three friends heard about all this adversity that had come upon him, they came, each one from his own place—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him. 12 When they looked from a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe, and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. 13 Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights, with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.

That one verse is 13, for seven days no one said a word. They just sat with him.

Compare this to chapter after chapter of them trying to explain Job's suffering when he finally concludes in Job 16:1, “Miserable comforters are you all!”

Henri Nouwen (en-ree know-en) in his book “Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life” wrote this:

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.

Just sitting with in silence with one who is suffering can mean a lot just in itself. We do not have to fill the room with words. That person may share something with us and our mind goes to work trying to develop a clever answer. We think deeper and deeper hoping that we can come up with an answer that will save the day. But did that person share with us so that we can save the day? We must realize that we do not have to share wisdom, answers, or explanations at every point. If someone rants against God then do not necessarily feel like we need to defend God. God is pretty big. Let them rant. That may be the most cathartic thing for them at that time.

We do not have to “fix” them. We are all not brilliant counselors who know the best answer for every situation. But something that we can be no matter who we are, is someone who is there for them always: to listen.

Job’s friends just sitting with him for two weeks in silence may be the most important verse in the Bible on how to help someone who is suffering.

Unless you have been through something similar, do not try to understand their pain. Something like “I really feel bad that you are suffering like this” will go further than trying to relate.

Someone shared that he had just suffered a terrible loss. One person came and sat next to him and shared many passages of Scripture and words of wisdom and he couldn’t wait for that person to leave. Later on, someone else came and put his hand on his back and bowed his head and said nothing. And he was hoping that person would never leave.

Matthew 25:34-36

34 “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’”

In each of these examples, one, probably two, stand out for our discussion. “I was sick, and you visited Me.” I was sick, I was suffering, and you came to me. Notice what it simply says and what it does not

say. It does not say, “I was sick, and you came and you visited and shared words of wisdom.” Or “I was sick, and you visited and mowed my lawn.” Yes, sharing words of wisdom and mowing someone’s lawn or bringing them a meal are all really good things to do. But Jesus’ point was that, “I was sick, I was suffering, and you came to me and that was enough.” There was no complement of speech necessary nor chores being done. Just presence was enough.

The same could be said about “I was in prison, and you came to Me.”

Just being there for the person who is hurting makes a world of difference.

10.2 Acknowledge their grief

We do no service or compassion to ourselves or to the other person when we avoid talking about the other person’s suffering. Pretending that they are not suffering, that they are not confused, that they are not struggling is not going to make the problem magically go away. That is like closing your eyes and thinking that no one can see you.

There is no embarrassment in pain. No shame in hurting.

Avoiding someone so that neither of you will have to bring up “the subject” will not bring joy and comfort into their lives. You do not support people by ignoring them.

Even if you do not know them well, you might be able to approach them and say, “I heard what happened. I’m so sorry. Do you want to talk about it?”

Of course, everyone is different, but even when someone lost someone, they oftentimes want to talk about that person. They do not want that person erased from their life. They want to keep those memories alive, even years later. You may feel uncomfortable bringing it up, but put your ease-of-life aside for the sake of the other person. Be gentle in how you bring it up, and, if they do not want to talk about it, just say, “I understand” and move on to another subject.

But do not act like that deceased person never existed. That person in front of you, their life is like a donut with a hole in the middle that can never be filled in. But, when they are ready, and it is when THEY are ready, they will want to laugh about how silly that person was, or remember how smart they were, or how they sometimes said the dumbest things. It is a hole, yes, but that hole does not have to be empty and forbidden. It can be filled with memories. Memories that they might want to share with you, a friend.

Throughout the Bible, God acknowledges our suffering, our pain. Are not we supposed to imitate God?

10.3 Realize and allow people to grieve differently

You may be someone who cries your eyes out and then feels better. But other people may have delayed grief. The loss does not hit them until weeks or even months later, and that is OK.

God did not make you the arbiter of how other people can grieve or what their response to suffering is. We should honor their way of grieving and not interfere with that by telling them how they are supposed to feel.

Of course, this excludes sinful responses. Getting drunk to overcome your suffering is not acceptable no matter what. And it is well within your right to point out that sin but with gentleness. Remember Galatians 6:1

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

Dr. Thomas Attig in his book “Disenfranchised Grief Revisited: Discounting Hope and Love” writes, “Disenfranchising messages actively discount, dismiss, disapprove, discourage, invalidate, and delegitimize the experiences and efforts of grieving. In this way, the people around the bereaved withhold permission, disallowing, constraining, hindering, and even prohibiting the survivor's mourning.”

Do not deprive someone of how they want to grieve. Be there for their grieving, not to tell them how they should do it.

10.4 Do not forget to pray for their current situation and not just for relief

Praying for healing, for deliverance, and for relief is good. It shows a trust in God's grace and omnipotence.

But do not forget to pray for where they currently are. That is an immediate grace that they need. Pray that they would be comforted, that they would have hope, that they would reach out to God.

God, for whatever reason, may not want to deliver them from their suffering right now and maybe not ever. But right now, where they are at right now, they need grace.

They need strength, encouragement, comfort, perseverance, joy, and many other things. Do not just pray for the future, pray for the now.

10.5 Do not judge them

When we see other Christians suffering, we must first have compassion, and not judge.

You don't want to be told, as Job said in Job 16:2, “Miserable comforters are you all!” And then again in Job 19:2-3,

How long will you torment me and crush me with words? 3 These ten times you have insulted me; you are not ashamed to wrong me.

It is rare when we can tell from where we are standing that someone is suffering because of chastisement. We are to be gentle. When I thunder against another Christian because I think that their suffering is caused by their sin, it is usually not from a love of God but from a love of self. That person in front of you in their misery may be standing in the same position as Job stood.

It is not our job to try and trace their current situation back to some causal sin. It is our job to be like God.

Psalm 34:18, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”

10.6 Bear their burdens

Galatians 6:2 tells us to “bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

That word “burden” in the Greek means something that is extreme or excessive in its weight. It is something that is too much to bear. A different Greek word is used for burdens that are more manageable. The phrase “bear on another’s burdens” means to carry off, to take, at least part of the other person’s burden.

How can we do this? If the burden is ... then we can ...

If the burden is: Disabled such as a broken bone or sick because of a severe medical treatment

Then we can:

- Mow their lawn.
- Cook them meals.
- Run errands for them.
- Drive them to appointments.
- Clean the house.

If the burden is: Financial

Then we can:

- Buy them groceries.
- If applicable, pay for their medication.
- Pay for utilities.

If the burden is: Temptation or sin

Then we can:

- Be an accountability partner.
- Meet with them once a week to do a Bible study on what they are struggling with.
- Help that person to see that there is a better way to satisfy that need or desire than by sinning.

If the burden is: Grief

Then we can:

- Listen. Let them talk. Let them cry. Let them rant. Let them complain.
- Call them, perhaps every day if necessary. Do not text. Be personal. Let them hear you. Let them hear your concern. Do not care about what the latest pop media is saying. You are trying to comfort someone and do what is right. That style goes back thousands of years and will continue for thousands of more years long after TikTok is forgotten.

If the burden is: Depression

Then we can:

- Recognize their pain. Do not tell them that a smile is just a frown turned upside-down. That is true if you want an artificial Christian with artificial emotions. But that is not what we want, is it? We want a healed Christian. We want a victorious Christian. We do not want a white-washed Christian.

- Be available. Do not just help when it is convenient for you. They cannot schedule their suffering to coincide with when your schedule is free.
- Stay in the situation until the burden is relieved.

Always, in your own prayer time (hoping that you do have a prayer time), pray for them. Pray for them when you are at a red traffic light. Pray for them when you are in line at the food store. Pray for them when you are waiting for your food to cook at the microwave.

And, always, be sincere in your caring. I was once going through a rough patch and someone told me that they were praying for me. I said, “Really, you’re praying for me?” There was a short pause. The conviction was thick in the air. Then they said, “Well, no. I haven’t been praying for you.” Did they say that they were praying for me to make me feel better or to make themselves look spiritual and caring? Because either way, it wasn’t helpful. Giving the impression that you are praying is not as good as actually praying to God. Pretending that you care is not as good as actually caring.

As Christians, we are not in this fight alone. We have a community. We have a church. If you are not committed to and involved in a good church, then you will struggle.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 tells us, **“And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.”** This is usually used for marriage. But it is just as true for suffering. There is power in numbers.

11 Biblical examples of suffering and how they responded

11.1 Joseph

The first person in the Bible that we are going to look at is Joseph. No, not the obvious Joseph son of Jacob in the Old Testament. Joseph the husband of Mary and father of Jesus.

Joseph had at least four instances of suffering in the Bible.

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- 1) When Mary was pregnant
- 2) When they could not find a place for their child to be born
- 3) When they had to flee to Egypt
- 4) When they had lost their son returning from the census

How did Joseph and Mary handle each of these situations?

First, let’s try to get an idea of who Joseph was and the culture that he lived in. Why is this important? Because we want to see Joseph as more than just a name and even more than just as a cardboard figure. We want to see him as a real person, someone whom we could have talked to or seen walking past us on a dusty dirt road.

To accomplish this, we are going to look at how people lived back then and then we will specifically see what kind of life Joseph might have lived.

In his book, “Injustice or God's will? Early Christian explanations of poverty,” S. J. Friesen created a seven-level poverty scale. I will condense it to four levels for simplicity.

[Slide for each level]

The top level consisted of Elites such as Imperial dynasty, Roman senatorial families, provincial officials, retired military officers, wealthy families, and some merchants. This was only about 2% of the population.

The next level down were those with moderate surplus resources which included some merchants, traders, artisans, and military veterans. This was about 7% of the population.

The next level were those at the subsistence level. These were people who had just enough to live on but no extra. These were mostly merchants, traders, shop owners, farmers, tavern owners, and wage earners. This was about 64% of the population.

The bottom level were some farmers, widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, and prisoners. This was about 27% of the population.

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Therefore, about 91% of the people, at that time, lived at or below the subsistence level. This means that most people barely had enough to live on day-by-day.

In ancient Mediterranean culture it was rare for someone to move up in status. Normally people did not even try to get higher positions in their life and career. The landless tenant did not become a landowner; a craftsman selling his productions did not become a wealthy trader. One's status in life was thought to have been inherited by birth. It was not reasonable and honorable to try to achieve a higher status. But losing one's status was shameful.

Finally, to get a more complete understanding of life back then, here is a quick look at taxes.

There were two types of taxes. First, Rome collected taxes from the provinces to pay for their roads, their army, the government, and all of their building projects. The second tax was the local government collecting taxes to sustain the lifestyle of the rulers and to build their elaborate palaces, buildings, and statues.

Usually, taxes were not on individuals like they are today. The tax quota was placed on the entire village and it was up to the local officers to collect the required amount. If they collected more than was required, they did not give the excess back to the people. Rather, they kept it for themselves.

Taxes were generally collected during harvest. So, if it was a bad harvest due to any number of reasons such as weather, natural disasters, or insects, the people still had to give their required amount. This could leave them starving. In addition, they could be forced into labor or anything that they own could be requisitioned by the government such as carts and animals.

If they could not pay the taxes, then they had to take out a loan. The debt would have to be paid back at the next harvest. If that was another bad harvest then they might lose their land and become destitute. They could even be reduced to beggars.

Many went from being landowners to being tenant farmers meaning that they now worked land that belonged to others. Or they became a day laborer. Those who fell below the sustenance level might have to resort to becoming bandits, slaves, or prostitutes.

Life in Jesus' times was uncertain, rough, and oftentimes despairing.

It is not clear which class Joseph's family belonged to, but a best guess is that, being craftsmen, they were in the subsistence level.

Around 85% of the people lived in rural areas or in small towns and these mostly made their living from agriculture. This is why Jesus' parables and teachings were mostly agriculturally related; the people could understand and relate to these concepts.

Now we will look more specifically at Joseph. Not much is written about Joseph having more written about Jesus's trade and homelife. But since it is most likely that Jesus took on his father's profession and lived with his father, we will be able to extrapolate Joseph's life from what is said about Jesus.

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According to the Bible, Jesus lived in Nazareth, a village near Galilee, from age 3 to his early 20s. Archaeological excavations have revealed that Nazareth in Jesus's time consisted of 50 or so homes spread over six acres with perhaps two or three clans living in them. The town of Nazareth is thought to have had 200 to maybe 400 people and sat on top of a small hill.

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The majority of houses in Israel were constructed using stones rather than wood. If you see pictures of Israel, you will notice that there are plenty of stones. Trees, on the other hand, were harder to find.

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Nazareth stood less than four miles from a major urban center, Sepphoris.

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"Sepphoris was founded as the capitol of Galilee. Herod Antipas (the Herod who had John the Baptist beheaded) built up Sepphoris so much so that the Jewish historian Josephus called it "The Jewel of all Galilee." It was invested with all the trappings of a Greek or Roman city life as a major center of political activity for that region of the country. As a result, the excavations at Sepphoris have found extensive building programs, theaters, amphitheaters, and the like.

<https://leadership.lifeway.com/2017/04/04/the-forgotten-jesus-part-2-was-jesus-a-carpenter-or-a-stonemason/>

Sepphoris was about an hour's walk from Nazareth and about halfway between was a great rock quarry. Every craftsman in the area would have helped in the work and that would probably have included Joseph.

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Every town and village needed builders to help build and maintain homes which were made of stone. Chief among the builders was the stonemason. Stonemasons were common in those days because stone was abundant; wood was more rare and quite valuable in that culture. Many things that are typically built with wood today were built with stone at that time. Along with the stonemason was the carpenter, whose work for the home included helping to build and maintain the roof, and making the doors, lintels,

shelves, tables, and cabinets. Only the rich could afford paneled rooms and woodwork, which were considered opulent. For use outside the home, carpenters made ladders, wheels, yokes for the animals, and farm implements (or at least the handles).

Jesus being born and growing up in Nazareth indicates that he was a peasant boy in a peasant village.

Dwellings in many rural parts of Israel have changed little since Biblical times. Jesus himself probably lived in a blocklike one-room house of stone and dried mud or a two-story house with a lower level for animals and the upper level for people. His family probably would have risen at daybreak and perhaps had a chunk of bread and a handful of olives.

When it comes to Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark (6:3) there is a brief mention of his trade: he was a tekton (pronounced tek-tin). This Greek word is traditionally translated in Bibles as 'carpenter', which is probably because of middle-age paintings. Indeed, tekton basically means a builder of any kind. So, Jesus was not necessarily a carpenter or a 'wood-worker, who made doors or furniture for the stone or mud-brick houses and ploughs and yokes for farmers' (Brown 1997:67). A tekton could have referred as well to a sculptor or - most probably in this case - to a craftsman who works at the buildings made of stone (Batey 1984:249-258). It has to be remembered that there were large building projects in Galilee at the time of Jesus, and an especially important one, Sepphoris, just a few miles (one hour's walk) from Nazareth, his childhood home town. When the Romans built Sepphoris they certainly used local people, both slaves and waged laborers from nearby villages. If Jesus' family had the same difficulties that almost every family at that time had, they could not afford a large family and some members of the family had to leave farming and find a job elsewhere (Oakman 2008:171). It might as well be that the tekton in Mark 6:3 refers to a stoneworker.

There are two places in the Gospels where Joseph and/or Jesus's trade is referred to. One is Mark 6:1-3 and the other is Matthew 13:53-57. They are the same incident. In both of those places we see the term used derisively.

Mark 6:1-3

Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him. 2 And when the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man learn these things, and what is this wisdom that has been given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? 3 Is this not the carpenter [tekton], the son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are His sisters not here with us?" And they took offense at Him.

The word translated as "carpenter" is tekton which, as you saw, actually refers to a craftsman in general without regard to what type.

The context is that Jesus was teaching with such wisdom that the people were astonished. They were astonished because Jesus did not strike them as someone who should have been that learned and wise. After all, he was just a craftsman. So being called a craftsman, in this case, was derogatory. It was a put down. Then at the end of this passage we see that they took offense at Him further validating that calling Jesus a craftsman was an insult. It was as if to say, "A craftsman shouldn't be this smart."

Though Jesus could certainly have been a carpenter, it may be more likely that He was a stonemason because of the quarry near His village and because stone was abundant and trees were not, most craftwork in the area would have been with stone. This is perhaps validated with Jesus's many references to stone and not too many to wood.

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?" (Luke 20:17–18)

"Upon this rock I will build My church." (Matthew 16:18)

When passing the temple Jesus said, "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Mark 13:1-2).

"And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." (Matthew 21:44)

We see other references to stone.

Jesus is the chief cornerstone in Matthew 21:42.

1 Peter 2:5 says, "you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

We do not see Jesus using as many references to wood or carpentry.

But it is not crucial to exactly determine Jesus's profession whether He was a stonemason or a carpenter.

A craftsman had a profession and often worked from his home, so he was better off than a wage earner. He had the tools of his trade and could make extra money by taking in young men as apprentices. Jesus' family was economically established enough to teach him to read and write and instruct him in the knowledge of the Biblical scriptures. The poor did not give their children enough education to read and write, cite passages, and create parables. However, some of the working class could afford to send their children to study reading and writing and saw it as a worthwhile investment to help with future employment. This is one reason why it is thought that Joseph's family was in the upper part of the sustenance class or maybe even moderate surplus class.

Mary's daily chores probably consisted of grinding corn, wheat or barley to make bread; doing the laundry, fetching water, cleaning; and making the meals, usually a thick porridge made of wheat or barley supplemented by a vegetable, such as beans, lentils, or cucumbers. As was true with all families at that time the family ate from a common bowl.

So now we, hopefully, have a better picture of who Joseph was. He was a craftsman, possibly a stonemason. He would have been in good physical condition and his family may have been a bit better off than most of those around him.

Now let us look at instances of where Joseph suffered.

11.1.1 Joseph and the suffering of betrayal

Matthew 1:18-19

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, since he was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

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The Jewish rabbis set the minimum age for marriage at twelve years for the girl, and thirteen years for the boy. A boy should certainly be wed by the time he was eighteen to twenty. Betrothal was a vital part of marriage in biblical times. Once a young man had chosen his prospective bride, and she had consented (if of age), a formal declaration of marital intent was made in the presence of two witnesses. The couple was then betrothed.

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The betrothal period was fixed by law. For a maiden, it was from ten months to a year; for a widow, three months. From the time of her betrothal until the marriage actually took place, a woman was treated as if she were actually married. However, they did not live together. The woman continued to live with her parents and the man with his. This waiting period was to test the faithfulness of the pledge of purity by the bride. If she was found with child or caught in immorality then the marriage would be annulled. The betrothal could not be dissolved except by divorce; breach of faithfulness was regarded as adultery. (Jackson, Wayne. Background Bible Study. Montgomery: Apologetics Press, 1986.) If, at the end of this betrothal period, the bride was found to be pure, then the husband would go to the bride's house and in a colorful processional march would lead his bride back to his house where they would marry and then live as husband and wife. Thus, there were two ceremonies: one at the betrothal and one at the wedding.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/ancient-jewish-marriage/>

In these times, marriage was not an agreement between two people but between two families. When the two became engaged, the father of the groom paid a dowry or mohar to the father of the bride. "Mattan" was the Hebrew word for the gifts given by the groom to the bride in addition to the mohar.

We see this in Genesis 34:8-12

8 But Hamor spoke with them, saying, "The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. 9 And intermarry with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. 10 So you will live with us, and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it and acquire property in it." 11 Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, "Let me find favor in your sight, and I will give whatever you tell me. 12 Demand of me ever so much **bridal payment** [mohar] and **gift** [mattan], and I will give whatever you tell me; but give me the girl in marriage."

What the NASB translates as "bridal payment" and "gift" is actually the mohar and mattan respectively.

We also see this in Genesis 24:53 when Abraham's servant was to take Rebekah back to marry Isaac, **"And the servant brought out articles of silver and articles of gold [mattan], and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave precious things [mohar] to her brother and to her mother."** The

“articles of silver and articles of gold and garments” were the mattan and the “precious things” were the mohar.

Since the woman would come back to live with the man, the man’s household would gain a helper but the woman’s household would lose one. Therefore, it was reasonable to compensate the woman’s family for her loss.

Women generally married when they were teenagers and endured seven or eight pregnancies to have three or four children.

Back to our scripture.

At this point, Joseph had no idea that his beloved Mary’s pregnancy was from God. The obvious conclusion was that she had committed adultery. How would you feel if your spouse was found to have committed adultery? Most likely your emotions would range from rage to intense rage. “She will have to pay and pay dearly. The big question is where to bury the body.”

In Biblical times, engagement was a legally binding covenant just like marriage.

When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant out of wedlock, he had three choices.

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- 1) He could have had her stoned.

We see this in Deuteronomy 22:23-24

23 If there is a girl who is a virgin betrothed to a man, and another man finds her in the city and sleeps with her, 24 then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death: the girl, because she did not cry out for help though she was in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall eliminate the evil from among you.

This, in a way, would have been the easiest choice for Joseph. Mary and the entire problem would be gone, Joseph would have been in full compliance of the Law, and he could have gone on with his life. No one would have blamed him. In fact, many would have commended him for making the right choice.

- 2) He could have married her anyway.

However, this would have violated the law. Joseph was “righteous.” Because he was righteous, he could not break the law even if it went against his own feelings and love.

Also, if he married her, it would be assumed that he was the one who got her pregnant. This would have brought great shame to him and to his family including his parents.

Therefore, this was not really an option.

- 3) He could have divorced her.

This option had two possibilities:

Deuteronomy 24:2

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens, if she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, that he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her away from his house...”

- a) Go the usual process and divorce her publicly.

To break an engagement would have required a bill of divorce in which the causes for the divorce would have been declared before witnesses. It was customary in a bill of divorce to specify the causes for which the divorce was made, and witnesses were also present to testify to the divorce. This would have scandalized Mary and she would have carried that shame to the end of her life.

- b) Divorce her privately.

Matthew 1:19

And her husband Joseph, since he was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

“Planned to send her away secretly” meant that he would have divorced her without giving cause and without witnesses so that she would not have been disgraced.

In this case, it seems, Joseph resolved to put her away without specifying the cause; for he was not willing to make her a public example. This is the meaning here of "secretly." Joseph could have sued to have the mohar and mattan returned, but it is implied in that this was done in secret, that he did no such thing.

What was the suffering?

Joseph discovered that his betrothed love was pregnant. This was betrayal, shame to him and to his family, loss of trust, and loss of marriage. She promised to be his wife, yet she was unfaithful. His life was turned upside-down. Even if he secretly divorced her, there would still be questions. I am sure this caused Joseph great anguish.

What was his remedy to this suffering?

He did not save himself by throwing all of the blame on the offending person. He loved her and, even with her betrayal, his feelings did not shift 180 degrees. He ultimately made the most difficult choice. It was the choice to preserve as much as possible her dignity. He did not make himself look good by making her look bad.

Sometimes our suffering of betrayal or shame comes from someone close to us, maybe even a spouse or a child. Our tendency is to get revenge, to strike back. “See what happens to you when you hurt me? I’ll make sure that you never do that again!” And we not only allow the worse to come to that person, but we are glad for it and, sometimes, we even guide the situation so that the worse does occur. We gossip about the person. We may sabotage them at work or church. We glare at them. We make sure that everyone knows what they did to me.

But that was not Joseph's way. Even in his heartbreak and betrayal, he still desired to preserve Mary's dignity as much as possible. Yes, he had to get out of the situation, but he was not going to leave her ruined.

When we are hurt by another, rather than stew in bitterness and revenge, we should rise above that and try God's route. At first it may seem more difficult. We would rather follow our feelings and pride. We would rather that person pay. But, in the long run, it is always better to follow God's path.

First, try and reconcile with that person.

Romans 12:18

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people.

Go to that person, not with a spirit of accusation, but with humble questioning.

Not with "Do you have any idea what you did to me?"

But "You know that you did that, did you realize the consequences that it would have on me? I'm just trying to understand."

If this goes well and you are both reconciled then you are at peace. There may be a lack of trust that might need to be worked out over time, but that is OK.

If the other person is hostile and what they did was clearly sin, then you should consider reproofing them.

Consider **Galatians 6:1**

Brothers and sisters, even if a person is caught in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual are to restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you are not tempted as well.

[Slide for each point]

Notice the three criteria:

- 1) "You who are spiritual" does not mean that you have to be a great, mature Christian before you can reprove someone. It means that you must approach that person with the spiritual mindset of wanting that person to be brought back to God and not with the fleshly mindset of wanting revenge and payback.
- 2) "a spirit of gentleness" means that you come to them humbly and gently and not with finger-pointing and harsh accusations. It means coming with an attitude of "Don't you realize how much that sin is going to hurt you?" rather than "How could you be such a jerk!?"
- 3) "looking to yourself" means that you, too, are a sinner and you might have even committed that same sin yourself. Maybe it wasn't exactly the same but it was similar. They stole \$10,000 from the church, but have you never stolen anything in your lifetime? Also, don't use their sin as an excuse to commit the same sin. "Well, she cheated on me so I'm going to cheat on her."

If their sin is significant and/or appears to be chronic, then consider taking the steps in Matthew 18:15-17.

- 1) First go to him in private.
- 2) If he does not listen then go with two or three others.
- 3) If he still does not listen then take the issue before the church.
- 4) And if he still does not listen then let him be as a tax collector.

But no matter which step this ends on, ultimately you must forgive him. God has forgiven you of the ocean of your sins. You should be willing to forgive this person of their drop of sin against you.

We see here, that Joseph's suffering was due to his perception of someone sinning against him and hurting him. This came at great loss including his marriage plans to be forfeited. His heart was broken.

The way that he avoided further suffering through bitterness and hate was to love that person and do the best for her.

11.1.2 Joseph and the suffering of uncertainty, confusion, and hardship

Here is Joseph's second instance of suffering as recorded in the Bible.

Luke 2:4-7

4 Now Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, 5 in order to register along with Mary, who was betrothed to him, and was pregnant. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Mary was pregnant, probably very pregnant. They were more than likely hoping for her to give birth at home in prepared surroundings with family and friends right there ready to help. All would go well. More than likely they had the baby's crib, blankets, and supplies all ready. Assignments were given out: "When Mary goes into labor you get the towels, you get the basin of water, you get the soap. You go get my parents and you go get Mary's parents."

But then came the "oh, no!"

The register mentioned in verse 5 is defined in verses **1 – 3**

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. 2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all the people were on their way to register for the census, each to his own city.

This census was for a new Roman tax. People had to go to their ancestral home. Since David was of the house and family of David, he had to go to Bethlehem.

It is unlikely that Mary had to go since Joseph could have fulfilled the requirements of the census. But she came along. Perhaps it was because she was so far along in her pregnancy and Joseph and Mary wanted to be together when the child was born.

But, also, that Mary came along was a fulfillment of a prophecy written 700 years earlier.

Micah 5:2

**But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will come forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His times of coming forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity.**

That Mary was pregnant at the same time as the registry and was married to a man who had to go to his ancestral home in Bethlehem all had to come together at the same time in order to fulfill a 700-year-old prophecy. Coincidence or divine fulfillment? God always knows what He is doing. When God, through divine inspiration, had the prophet Micah write this prophecy, it was 700 years before it was to be fulfilled. So many things could have happened in that time.

- Israel could have been destroyed or driven out of the land to be nomads in foreign countries.
- Bethlehem could have been ruined and so was no more or it might have been taken over by foreign rulers who would not allow Jewish customs.
- Rome might not have come to power and there might not have been a census and so no reason for Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem.

Our country, the United States, is just over 200 years old and look how much has changed in just that amount of time. Five hundred years from now, who can know what our country will be like, what cities will still be here, what people will occupy the land?

Yet, with all that could change, all that which is unknown and not even predictable, God made sure that this one verse, of only 42 English words, was precisely and exactly fulfilled 700 years later. Even something like the timing of the census and the timing of Mary's pregnancy had maybe a one- or two-week window. If Mary was not quite so far along, they would have traveled to Bethlehem, registered at the census, and made it back to Nazareth where she gave birth. Prophecy not fulfilled.

If the census was a week or two later, then Mary probably would have probably given birth in Nazareth before leaving for Bethlehem. Prophecy not fulfilled.

But 700 years later, God worked out even that one little detail, so that she gave birth during their short stay in Bethlehem. Prophecy fulfilled. And that was just one detail out of many that was required for Micah 5:2 to be fulfilled just as God said. We should never doubt the sovereignty, the providence of God.

What was the uncertainty, confusion, and hardship in Joseph's suffering? Let us look at each part of this story and see:

- 1) The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem
- 2) Finding a place to stay
- 3) Giving birth

1) The Journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem

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The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have been about 80 miles. How long this would have taken with a pregnant woman ranges from four days to one week with it most likely being closer to the longer

time. A pregnant women would need to stop more often and would get tired more easily. Traveling at 2 mph for six traveling hours per day (12 miles per day) would be about a week.

However, the Bible never states that they had a donkey. That Mary rode on a donkey came from “The Protoevangelium of James” which was a 2nd century non-biblical account of Mary’s life. This states that Joseph saddled his donkey “and set her upon it; and his son led it, and Joseph followed.” Is this book possibly correct?

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Well, it also says that Joseph was an old man and had children from a previous marriage and that one of his sons led Mary’s donkey. With that kind of nonsense, nothing in this text can be believed.

Riding a donkey is not comfortable. It is bouncy and rough and a nine-month pregnant woman would not have been able to ride for 80 miles. Therefore, it is considered by some that possibly Mary walked either part of the way or all of the way.

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But the most likely scenario is that they traveled in a large caravan. Many people would have going to Bethlehem to register. The way would have been dangerous. Robbers and wild animals would have been common. It would have been safer and more convenient to travel in a group. In that case, her journey might have been divided between walking, riding on a donkey, camel, or in a cart. It might not have been this long, heroic duo journey, but one shared with many fellow travelers.

Now we are starting to get a good picture of the context. Mary was perhaps nine months pregnant. Her feet hurt, her back hurt, she was exhausted. They were traveling 80 miles over the course of a week either by walking or riding in some bumpy cart. They were dirty and if they traveled in a caravan as is likely, then they were really dirty what with all of dirt and dust kicked up by a bunch of animals, carts, and people.

What was the hardship?

Imagine you or your wife is nine-months pregnant. You have to go on an 80-mile journey that will be bumpy and dirty and may involve some walking. The food wouldn’t be the best and might have to be rationed. Sleep will be intermittent. And perhaps most grating of all, you are told that you have to do this by your government so that you can pay more taxes.

But Joseph did not run away with Mary and hide from his responsibilities or from the hardship that he knew was coming. He did what was right. He clearly planned ahead and because they arrived at their destination, we know that he made sure that Mary was taken care of. And, if indeed, they traveled in a caravan and not the, probably, fanciful story of the two of them with one donkey, then Joseph arranged for them to be with a small community to help with the journey.

When we are pretty certain that a hardship or trial is coming, we, too, should plan ahead and not bury our heads in the sand and hope that it goes away.

We should consider how to gather others around us for support, encouragement, and guidance.

If there will be others affected by this hardship, then plan whatever is necessary to ensure that they will make it through safely.

If we know that resources will be thin, be they finances, emotions, health, or something else, then use those resources wisely. Stretch them out. Do not waste them frivolously.

Consider **Lamentations 1:9**, “... **She did not consider her future. Therefore she has fallen astonishingly...**”

2) Finding a Place to Stay

We just looked at how Joseph and Mary made a weeklong, bumpy and dirty 80-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We can't wait to be at our destination after driving in an air-conditioned car for a couple of days.

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Imagine their joy when they first sighted Bethlehem. “Look. Mary! There it is! Bethlehem. We're finally going to get some rest. You'll be able to put your feet up in a nice quiet place for a change.”

Now here is where we have competing stories regarding where they stayed and Jesus' birth.

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The most common one is that Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem and Joseph went to the inn to get a room. But there was no room at the inn because so many people were there to register and he was turned away. Some stories have him going to several more inns and, likewise, being turned away. He managed to find someone who would allow them to use their stable. Mary, usually that same night, gave birth to Jesus in the stable surrounded by animals and laid Jesus into a feeding trough. The shepherds appeared and then the Magi (usually three) came with their gifts. [Joseph then goes into the Christmas card industry and makes a killing.] That is the story that is in all of the movies and the one that we are most familiar with.

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Here's the competing story. Joseph and Mary come to Bethlehem and stay at one of their relative's houses. But since the guest room is full, they have to sleep in the main room. After at least several days, if not weeks, Mary goes into labor. She gives birth to Jesus in the house perhaps with a bunch of women nearby leading a hand and puts Him into the feeding trough that is in the animal's section of the house.

Which story is most likely? Let's take a look at the details of the passage.

What about the inn?

First, Bethlehem was a small town in the upper mountains of Judea. Archeologist W. F. Albright estimated the population of Bethlehem to have been about 300 when Jesus was born (Anchor Bible Commentary: Matthew, Albright and Mann). It was not on main highways or trade routes. It more than likely did not even have an inn.

Second, “there was no room for them in the inn.” The Greek word for “inn” here is kataluma. Kataluma is used in only two other times in the New Testament. In both places it is clear that it is a guest room in a house.

The first instance is Luke 22:10-12

And He [Jesus] said to them, “When you have entered the city, a man carrying a pitcher of water will meet you; follow him into the house that he enters. 11 And you shall say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, “Where is the guest room [kataluma] in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?’” 12 And he will show you a large, furnished upstairs room; prepare it there.”

Here it is clear that this is a room in a person’s house.

The second instance is the parallel passage in Mark 14:14

and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher says, “Where is My guest room [kataluma] in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?’”

In both of these cases, kataluma is clearly indicating a guest room in a house and not an inn.

Furthermore, the usual word for inn is pandokheion which means “a public house for the reception of strangers.” Luke 10:34-35, in the story of the Good Samaritan and the only time this word is used in the New Testament, says, **“and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn [pandokheion] and took care of him. 35 On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’”**

The only other time in the New American Standard Bible that you see the word “inn” in the English is Acts 28:15, but that is a different word [Tabernōn] which is perhaps better translated as “tavern.”

So we see that the word “inn” is usually translated as “guest room” and that a different Greek word is usually used for “inn.”

Many translations do translate the word as “guest room” or something similar.

- The Bible in Basic English (BBE) translates it as “house.”
- The Common English Bible (CEB) has “guestroom.”
- The Complete Jewish Bible has “living-quarters.”
- The New International Version (NIV) has “guest room.”
- Young’s Literal Translation has “guest-chamber.”

That being said, most translations do have it as “inn” probably because that is what we expect.

Third, Luke 2:4 reads in part, **“Now Joseph also went... to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David.”**

Hospitality is profoundly important in the Middle East.

Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home. Since people did not move around a lot back then, it would be safe to say that he still had relatives in Bethlehem. If that was the case, then Joseph would have been honor bound to seek out one of those relatives to stay at his house.

This is the most likely scenario because in Luke 1:39-40 we read,

Now at this time Mary set out and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was from the area where Bethlehem is located although we do not know exactly where and her house could have been close or many miles away. If Joseph did not have any relatives in Bethlehem itself, then it is most likely that they would have gone to Elizabeth's house directly and stayed there. But they did not, probably because they knew that they did not have to. They found room at one of Joseph's relative's houses.

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Kenneth Bailey, a Middle Eastern and New Testament scholar, wrote: "[My] thirty-year experience with villagers in the Middle East is that the intensity of honor shown to the passing guest is still very much in force, especially when it is a returning son of the village who is seeking shelter. We have observed cases where a complete village has turned out in a great celebration to greet a young man who has suddenly arrived unannounced in the village, which his grandfather had left many years before" ((Bailey, Kenneth, "The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7," Bible and Spade, Fall 2007, p. 103)).

If, however, there was not a relative in Bethlehem then Joseph could have appealed to the fact that "he was of the house and family of David." On this alone, Joseph and Mary would have been welcomed into any household.

And if none of those options worked, even a total stranger would be assured of someone showing him hospitality. Here are two examples of this.

Genesis 19:1-3

Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting at the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he stood up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. 2 And he said, "Now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way." They said, "No, but we shall spend the night in the public square." 3 Yet he strongly urged them, so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

Here, two angels disguised as men, came to Sodom and sat at the gate. Lot urged them to come into his house where he fed them and provided a bed for sleep.

In Judges 19 the Levite came looking for his runaway concubine. He stopped at Gibeah and, even though it was a wicked city, there was still an old man who offered hospitality.

Judges 19:20-21

Then the old man said, "Peace to you. Only let me take care of all your needs; however, do not spend the night in the public square." So he took him into his house and fed the donkeys, and they washed their feet and ate and drank.

It is highly unlikely that a man with his pregnant wife would have been left in the middle of the street and no one take them in, thereby, forcing him to search around until he could find nothing better than an animal stable.

Therefore, in this second of the two versions, it is most likely that Joseph and Mary stayed at someone's house.

But then what to make of the phrase "no room at the inn" or "no room in the guest room"?

More than likely, they came to a relative's house. Because of the registration, there were already people staying in the guest room. It would have been unconscionable for a host to move people out of the place where he told them they could stay even for the sake of a pregnant woman. Therefore, he more likely would have put Joseph and Mary into the main room or what we might call the living room which is where they stayed while they were there.

Here we see the suffering of confusion and uncertainty.

It is probable, once Joseph reached Bethlehem, he headed straight for the relative's house that he was intending to go to. But as he approached, he might have seen how crowded it was and, once he got inside, was told that there was no room in the guest room. Now what? We do not know how long it was from the time that they discovered that the guest room was unavailable to when they were provided a place to stay, but, during that time, Joseph might have been frazzled. However, they did get a place to stay, not because he was wandering around town asking everyone if they had any room anywhere, but because their host provided them with the main room.

When we are filled with confusion and uncertainty, we should not try to go it alone. Rather, we should trust in and rely upon the community that we have around us. Let others help us out. We see many instances in Scripture where people wanted to go it alone but others helped out and made the situation better.

We see in Exodus 18 that Moses sat alone judging all of the people's disputes. His father-in-law, Jethro, told Moses that he was going to burn out trying to do this all by himself. So Jethro advised Moses to "select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. 22 Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that they will bring to you every major matter, but they will judge every minor matter themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will carry the burden with you." And there at the end is the key phrase, "they will carry the burden with you."

When you are confused and uncertain, let others carry the burden with you. Or if you see someone struggling then you be the one who offers to help carry their burden. We are all in this together. No one is a lone ranger.

That is one of many reasons as to why being involved in a good church is so important. We all need to gather people around us so that we may bear one another's burdens.

Galatians 6:2 says

Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

We need to help bear each other's burdens because:

- We all stumble
- We all have doubts
- We all have moments of confusion

There is nothing noble about suffering in silence. You are not bothering people when asking for help. In fact, by asking for help, you are giving people the opportunity to be blessed by God by allowing them to help others.

When Joseph found out that they did not have the guest room, he did not storm out. He did not get huffy. He did not accuse and start an argument. Rather, he allowed them to help, and it worked out.

3) Mary giving birth

Did Mary give birth the very night that they arrived in Bethlehem?

Luke 2:6 states, **"While they were there, the time came for her to give birth."**

There is no indication of the amount of time in this phrase. But it does give a sense of "during their time while in Bethlehem" i.e., they had been there for at least a few days rather than "that very night..." It gives the sense of Joseph and Mary coming to Bethlehem to register and staying at a relative's house. And, while they were there, Mary's time came to give birth.

Besides, it makes sense that they would have stayed in Bethlehem for at least a few days, if not weeks. They would have just taken up to week to travel 80 miles with an exhausted, very pregnant Mary. It is doubtful that they would have registered and then quickly turned around and went back those same 80 miles right away. Mary would have needed rest. Plus, nothing helps induce giving birth like a good, bumpy ride.

Also, they were staying at a relative's house. They probably would have wanted to catch-up with everyone that they had not seen for a while.

Oftentimes, the houses in those times had the animal stables as part of the house but at a slightly lower level.

https://www.worldhistory.org/The_Four-Room_House/

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They might have stayed at an "Israelite house" or four-room house. They have unearthed some 300 of these houses. The house was rectangular. The back half might have had two stories. The front half would have had an open area or courtyard in the center or on a side and would have had a stable within the walls. The animals would have been kept here at night to protect from predators and thieves. They also would have provided warmth in the winter.

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In this picture you see the two-story back half with the courtyard in the middle of the front half.

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These two cut-away pictures show the living quarters with the animals in the courtyard.

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This is a larger house, possibly for a wealthier family. But, once again, you can see the people living areas in the same walled area as the animals.

Cooking was done over an open fire in the open part of the front courtyard.

<http://blog.adw.org/2014/07/what-were-typical-homes-like-in-jesus-time/>

Even some of the poorer houses would still be a stone square building with one general purpose room and a smaller room in the back for the animals.

Animals were very valuable in Jesus' time. They provided meat, milk, eggs, wool, skins, transportation, beasts of burden, and help in farming. This is why they were watched over closely and often kept in the shelter of the house at night. Hence many houses would have a feeding trough/manger, hay, and feed technically inside the house.

Then what might have happened when Mary gave birth?

Especially in a small town like Bethlehem, a woman giving birth would have been a notable event. Women from around the village would have been available to help in any way. Soon after Jesus was born, most likely in the main room where they had been sleeping, Mary went a few feet away and laid Jesus in the manger where it was quieter and perhaps, she could nurse in private. It would have been the closest thing to a readily available crib. It would have been a private moment with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.

There were probably many women scurrying around helping out with the birth.

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There would have been more around the manger than just a smiling cow and a moon-struck donkey.

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Then when the shepherds came to see the Messiah, probably on the night of His birth, He was there, in the manger with His mother Mary and His father Joseph.

What was the inconvenience?

The place where Mary gave birth was not ideal.

It was not back in their house in Nazareth which must likely would have been all setup to serve as a birthing room and then as a nursery. Joseph being a craftsman, might have already built a nice crib for the baby. But it went unused until they got back.

Rather, it was in the main room of a distant house where there was no crib ready but, instead, the closest thing to a crib being an animal feeding trough. This makeshift crib was not even in the guest

room of the house that they were staying at. The guest room was probably more comfortable but the manager was more private.

Though it is not explicitly written, from the subsequent events we get the impression that Joseph and Mary did not stomp about complaining but did what was right and made the most of a less than ideal situation. They rejoiced in the joy before them and did not gripe about the other less-than-ideal circumstances.

In **Luke 2:16-19**

16 And they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. 17 When they had seen Him, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. 18 And all who heard it were amazed about the things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.

“All,” which included Joseph, “heard about it were amazed.” Not complaining. Not grumbling. But amazed.

Verse 21

21 And when eight days were completed so that it was time for His circumcision, He was also named Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

Even under less-than-ideal circumstances, Joseph made sure that the Law was kept and Jesus was circumcised. Another example of how Joseph was a righteous man. He did not use inconvenience as an excuse to not do what he was supposed to do.

Verses 22-24

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

According to Leviticus 12:1-6, after giving birth, a woman was impure for seven days. No one could touch her lest they be polluted. Then for 33 more days, she was still impure but to a lesser degree. After these forty days, she would have to go to the Temple in Jerusalem to perform the purification rites. This rite consisted of offering a lamb of a year old as a burnt-offering, and a young pigeon or turtle-dove as a sin-offering. But if they could not afford this, then they could offer two turtle-doves or young pigeons, with one as a burnt-offering and the other as a sin-offering.

Notice that Joseph and Mary had to offer the two doves because they were not well off.

Jerusalem is only six miles from Bethlehem but quite a way from Nazareth. Therefore, it is believed that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus stayed for those forty days in Bethlehem at the relative’s house. If that is the case, then it makes it even more probable that they stayed at a relative’s house rather than paying to stay for over forty days at an inn.

Though there was a lot of uncertainty, confusion, and inconvenience, time after time, Joseph did what was right. He focused on solutions and not on problems. That is how we should be.

But as we study the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, we must always remember the real reason we celebrate: **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"** (1 Timothy 1:15)

11.1.3 The Escape to Egypt – Suffering caused by others

This is the third instance where we see Joseph going through a severe trial.

We read in **Matthew 2:13-15**

13 Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him." 14 So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. 15 He stayed there until the death of Herod; this happened so that what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled: "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

The "they" in verse 13—"Now when they had gone..."--were the Magi.

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The Herod here is Herod the Great; a man who was ruthless and crazy.

Here are the relatives that he murdered.

In 36 BC, Herod made his 17-year-old brother-in-law, Aristobulus III, high priest, because he feared that the Jews would make him their king instead of Herod. And then one year later, Herod ordered that Aristobulus III be murdered by drowning while at a party.

In 29 BC Herod thought that his wife, Mariamne I, was committing adultery. He put her on trial. Herod's sister, Salome I and Mariamne's mother, Alexandra, both testified against her. Mariamne was executed and Alexandra declared herself to be Queen, stating that Herod was mentally unfit to serve. Herod then executed her without trial.

In 28 BC Herod executed his brother-in-law Kostobar for conspiracy.

In 7 BC Herod accused his sons Alexander and Aristobulus of high treason and they were executed.

In 4 BC, Herod executed another son, Antipater.

What is the point of this exercise? It is to show that Herod responded to any threat of his throne and power with brutal murder no matter who it was. And, at this later point in his life, Herod was old and quite ill. He was even more deranged and dangerous.

This unknown Jesus is said to be the King of the Jews? Then, according to Herod, He must die. Herod did not suffer any real or perceived threats to his throne with patience and grace. At the slightest threat, the noose was tied, the blade was sharpened. Hence the urgency on Joseph's part to get away.

Here's Joseph, once again, put into a rough situation. He is jolted up in his sleep and told that if he doesn't leave immediately, probably his entire family will be killed. In a panic, he quickly gathers his wife and child, and, in the dark, heads to another country.

How long was this journey varies among commentators. The shortest distance would be 40 miles which would take a couple of days. Some say that it was more like 150 miles. That would take one to two weeks. Either way, the confusion was there. They didn't have time to pack much. They might not have known exactly where they were going or what to expect when they got there. Were they going to have to sleep on the side of the road? Would they be attacked by thieves? What about their house and their family and friends that they left behind? How long would they have to stay? So many unknowns. So much uncertainty. And all of this with a young child.

Yet they went. Despite the inconvenience, the trials, and the fears, they diligently obeyed God. They did not go a couple of towns over and hide because that was easier. They made that long journey to Egypt because God told them to.

How long did they stay in Egypt? Answers vary from three months to 3 ½ years.

This trial, this suffering and uncertainty was not the result of Joseph's sin, but was the result of someone else's sin. Someone was fearful of losing his power, his reputation, his fortune and so rather than come to a gracious compromise or understanding, he tried to destroy the competition. And Joseph and his family suffered as a result.

Many times, our suffering is not a result of what we have done wrong. It is not discipline from God to shake us up from our sin. Our suffering is the result of someone else's sin. So what do we do in those situations?

When Joseph was in that situation, he did exactly what God told him to do. He grabbed his family and, in the middle of the night, they left for Egypt. It was a long, arduous journey with much uncertainty. But Joseph and his family was willing to sacrifice comfort and convenience to do what God told them to do.

Now, of course, God is not likely to speak to us in our dreams and give us guidance. But He does speak to us in His word, the Bible.

When we are suffering because of someone else's sin, what does the Bible tell us? Here is some guidance that God gives to us.

[Slide for each point]

Forgive the other person. Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."

Do not let anger or bitterness take hold of you. Hebrews 12:15, "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;"

Seek advice from others. Proverbs 11:14, "Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in an abundance of counselors there is victory."

Bless that person, if possible, as hard as that might be. Romans 12:20-21, “‘But if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Pray for them. Matthew 5:44, “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

Some of those things will be more difficult than going to Egypt in the middle of the night. But God knows what He is doing and, by obeying God, you will be more blessed.

When you are being betrayed, persecuted, and sinned upon, do not let your anger be what dominates you. Do not let that other person turn you into something that you and God do not want you to be. Instead, be the person that God wants you to be and you will be more blessed than ever.

11.1.4 When Joseph lost Jesus on his way back from the census

This is our fourth and final example of Joseph going through a trial.

Luke 2:39-51

39 And when His parents had completed everything in accordance with the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. 40 Now the Child continued to grow and to become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the favor of God was upon Him. 41 His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when He was twelve years old, they went up there according to the custom of the feast; 43 and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days required, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but His parents were unaware of it.

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44 Instead, they thought that He was somewhere in the caravan, and they went a day’s journey; and then they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. 45 And when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, looking for Him. 46 Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. 48 When Joseph and Mary saw Him, they were bewildered; and His mother said to Him, “Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You!”

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49 And He said to them, “Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s house?” 50 And yet they on their part did not understand the statement which He had made to them. 51 And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued to be subject to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

It appears that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, they took him to Jerusalem and then from Jerusalem back to their home in Nazareth.

As an aside, Nazareth was considered to be a lowly and despised town. We see this in **John 1:46**, “**Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good be from Nazareth?”** This might have been because there

was a Roman garrison stationed there. We see this emphasized in **Isaiah 11:1**, “**Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots will bear fruit.**” The Hebrew word for “branch” implies something lowly or common. **Matthew 2:23** reads, “**and came and settled in a city called Nazareth. This happened so that what was spoken through the prophets would be fulfilled: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’**” Jesus was associated with a place that was despised.

Right off the bat in verses 39 and 41 we see how devout Joseph and Mary were. We see several key points here. Here are those two verses again.

39 And when His parents had completed everything in accordance with the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth.

41 His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.

[Slide at each of the points and for the passage]

- 1) They “completed.” They were not sporadically motivated to do something spiritual and then fade off when they lost interest. Rather, they followed through and completed what they had started to do in service to God. They did not decide to read through their Bible once a year and then fade off after a month. They did not join a ministry and then fade off when it was no longer novel and exciting. They did not go to the prayer meetings and then fade off when they felt like it was not their cup of tea. They started and they completed.
- 2) “completed everything in accordance with the Law of the Lord.” This meant that Jesus was circumcised and that they underwent the purification rituals as defined in **Leviticus 12:1-4**

‘When a woman gives birth and delivers a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days; as she is in the days of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. 3 Then on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. 4 And she shall stay at home in her condition of blood purification for thirty-three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed.

They did not do anything half-heartedly. They did everything. They were faithful to know and to obey God’s commandments. Notice that you cannot obey God if you do not know what God tells you to do. How do you know what God wants? Read your Bible. Go to church. Listen to sermons. Read books. Talk to other Christians. Follow the examples of godly men and women.

- 3) They went “every year” to Jerusalem for the Passover. They were consistent in their devotion to God. Notice that they went “every year.” They were not up and down. They did not just obey when it was convenient. They were not the type who would go to church just on Easter and Christmas or whenever they felt like it. They were not the type to read their Bible only when there was nothing good on TV.

Joseph and his family consistently completed everything that God commended them to do. We can conclude that Joseph devoutly raised his family in loving obedience to God as we all should.

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That the event in this passage occurred when Jesus was 12 is significant. Age 12 is when the Jewish boy has his bar mitzvah which means “son of the commandment.” This is a watershed moment in a Jewish boy’s life; a time of passage.

For this yearly trip to Jerusalem for the Passover, an entire group of people—relatives, friends, neighbors--would travel together. This might have been a large group. Also, we know that Jesus had younger, of course, brothers and sisters. So Joseph and Mary might have been preoccupied with babies or toddlers. None-the-less, they figured that Jesus was in the caravan with them. Maybe He was with everyone when they were ready to leave Jerusalem but then wandered off when the carts started rolling. We do not know.

A caravan could travel about 2 to 3 miles per hour for about 8 to 15 hours per day. That would depend on availability of food and water. So maybe an average of 30 miles per day. It might have been expected that Jesus would have sought out His parents at the end of the day for sleep. When He did not, his parents went looking for Him in the caravan, and, when they did not find Him, they turned around and went back to Jerusalem to find Him. Imagine the panic when, a full day’s journey away, you realize that you lost your child back in the city? Suppose that you were flying back from Los Angeles to New Jersey and when you are getting off of the plane you discover that you left your 12-year-old back in Los Angeles?

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Remember earlier in the chapter, Simeon blessed and prophesized about Jesus. He also prophesized about Mary saying, “a sword will pierce your own soul.” Perhaps, Joseph and Mary thought, this was the prophesy. Maybe Jesus is dead. Maybe our search is in vain. Maybe this is anguish that I will have to live with for the rest of my life. They might have been thinking, “We have failed our Son. We have failed as parents.”

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Then after three days of searching, they finally found Him in the Temple teaching.

That they turned around and went back to Jerusalem to search for Jesus and spent three days doing so is not noble in itself. That is what nearly every parent would do. It was their response when they found Him that is admirable.

Joseph and Mary found Jesus “in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions.”

“When Joseph and Mary saw Him, they were bewildered; and His mother said to Him, ‘Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You!’”

Notice that when Joseph found Jesus they did not rush over to Him and snatch him up and drag him off, yelling at Him the entire time. They respected the situation. They saw that there were teachers there. They did not try to take over the scene while acting like the poor put-upon victims.

That word for “bewildered” literally means “to strike with panic or shock, to amaze, with the outcome of being utterly amazed (dumbfounded) or left ‘at a loss’ from witnessing the incredible (causing the viewer to gape in astonishment).”

In order to be this amazed, Joseph and Mary had to be standing there quietly listening to their Son as He interacted with His teachers. They did not just swoop in yelling and carrying on. They did not make assumptions thinking that they knew everything. They stopped and assessed the situation. They made an effort to understand what their Son was doing and why.

The Greek more reads “Child, why have You done this to us?” And then Mary explains her question. “Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You!” “Anxiously” has the meaning of “deep, personal anguish expressed by great mourning. This root (ody-) literally means ‘go down’ (as the sun in a sunset) and refers to consuming sorrow.” It means to be “tormented, to suffer acute pain.” In their three-day search, Joseph and Mary were not just in a panic, they were not just breathlessly searching; they were tormented and in consuming pain. For three days they were in horror.

I think that the search being three long days and not that they found Him right away, only extends and deepens the suffering. Just like Jesus was three days in the tomb after He died, His parents were like three days in the land of the dead while searching for Jesus.

Notice that they did not call Jesus names or belittle Him. “Jesus, you stupid, little boy! Obviously, You don’t care about us! Obviously, You only care about Yourself and do what You what to do!”

Rather, Mary’s response was, “We have been in deep anguish looking for you. We have been tormented, mourning as though You were dead. Why did You do this to us?” Mary shared her heart; how Jesus’ actions deeply wounded her. If Jesus had just gotten into the caravan when it left Jerusalem this torment would never have happened. And yet, just like Joseph’s first trial when he felt like Mary had betrayed him, he and Mary responded with grace and respect. In both instances, Joseph did not lash out even though he might have had the right to do so. He did not condemn, wipe his hands clean, and leave. Instead, he protected and respected the person who did him harm. In the first trial, it was Mary, and, in this trial, it was Jesus. And because he did not just ditch those who hurt him, he ultimately found out that in both situations, it was God who was directly at work. It was God’s doing and it was a great and eternal plan at that.

11.1.5 Summary

We looked at four instances where Joseph was put into a tough situation. Yet in all cases, he showed kindness, did what was right, and obeyed God. Joseph was the “silent man” of the Bible. He never speaks a word, but through his actions we see someone who endured and who raised a godly family. He was forced to make great sacrifices time and time again. Yet, despite the trials, he consistently and completely obeyed God in all ways. We never read about him blaming God, quitting, or taking the easy way out. May we be more like Joseph in our times of betrayal, confusion, uncertainty, and inconvenience.

12 The Book of Lamentations

We will end this study on—what else? —the Book of Lamentations.

The theologian Dr. Robin Parry said

Increasingly we lack the social practices, words, and concepts necessary to grasp our pain by the horns and stare it in the face. We’ve been robbed of a vocabulary of grief and we suffer for it. The

book of Lamentations accosts us by the wayside as a stranger who offers us an unasked for, unwanted and yet priceless gift. The poetry of pain. We would be wise to pay attention.

The Book of Lamentations teaches us that God does not immunize us against suffering.

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The book of Lamentations consists of five poems, each one being its own chapter. The book may be the most structured in the Bible. Four out of five chapters have exactly 22 verses. These are chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5. Why 22?

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Because the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters. In chapters 1, 2, and 4, each verse starts with a different Hebrew letter and they go in order. So the first verse in each of these three chapters starts with the first Hebrew letter: alef or aleph (pronounced al-if). The second verse starts with the second Hebrew letter: bet (pronounced bet). And so on.

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The 22nd verse starts with the final, 22nd, Hebrew letter Tav (rhymes with have). It is called an alphabetic-acrostic structure. The fifth chapter does not follow this same order but it does have 22 verses.

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The third chapter has 66 verses: 22 times 3. Each Hebrew letter starts three lines. So it is the same basic structure as the other three acrostic chapters but tripled.

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The overall structure looks like this:

Later Alphabet	Earlier Alphabet			No Acrostic
Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4	Chapter 5
1 Alef א	1 Alef א	1 Alef א	1 Alef א	1
2 Bet ב	2 Bet ב	2 Bet ב	2 Bet ב	2
3 Gimel ג	3 Gimel ג	3 Gimel ג	3 Gimel ג	3
4 Dalet ד	4 Dalet ד	4 Dalet ד	4 Dalet ד	4
5 He ה	5 He ה	5 He ה	5 He ה	5
6 Vav ו	6 Vav ו	6 Vav ו	6 Vav ו	6
7 Zayin ז	7 Zayin ז	7 Zayin ז	7 Zayin ז	7
8 Chet ח	8 Chet ח	8 Chet ח	8 Chet ח	8
9 Tet ט	9 Tet ט	9 Tet ט	9 Tet ט	9
10 Yod י	10 Yod י	10 Yod י	10 Yod י	10
11 Kaf כ	11 Kaf כ	11 Kaf כ	11 Kaf כ	11
12 Lamed ל	12 Lamed ל	12 Lamed ל	12 Lamed ל	12
13 Mem מ	13 Mem מ	13 Mem מ	13 Mem מ	13
14 Nun נ	14 Nun נ	14 Nun נ	14 Nun נ	14
15 Samech ס	15 Samech ס	15 Samech ס	15 Samech ס	15
16 Ayin ע	16 Pe פ	16 Pe פ	16 Pe פ	16
17 Pe פ	17 Ayin ע	17 Ayin ע	17 Ayin ע	17
18 Tsade צ	18 Tsade צ	18 Tsade צ	18 Tsade צ	18
19 Qof ק	19 Qof ק	19 Qof ק	19 Qof ק	19
20 Resh ר	20 Resh ר	20 Resh ר	20 Resh ר	20
21 Shin ש	21 Shin ש	21 Shin ש	21 Shin ש	21
22 Tav ת	22 Tav ת	22 Tav ת	22 Tav ת	22

The Hebrew letters in the 16th and 17th positions are switched in chapter one versus chapters 2-4. This is because chapter one uses the order in the later Hebrew alphabet whereas chapters 2-4 use the order in the earlier Hebrew alphabet.

The fact that this book is so structured is, I believe, very significant in how we deal with suffering as we shall examine later on.

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The book of Lamentations is about the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar. The city was burned. The people walked 600 miles to Babylon.

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Those who were left were the poorest of the poor. This book was addressed to their grief.

There were defeats on three levels.

The first level was a military defeat. Israel had once been a great conquering nation. They sweep aside all enemies and claimed the land we now call Israel. But here they were defeated.

The second level was a political defeat. Israel was now subservient to Babylon.

The third level was a spiritual defeat. The Temple was destroyed. The priesthood was in shambles.

This book was written as though Jerusalem is a widow and the entire book has a funeral feel to it. It is written in qinah metre, where the first half of the cola is always, or nearly always, longer than the second half. It is sort-of like this: daaaa-da, daaaa-da, daaaa-da. It is sometimes informally referred to as a limping meter. This gives us the feel of how mourners might walk behind a coffin being carried in a funeral march: daaaa-da, daaaa-da, daaaa-da.

We can appropriate this book to our own pain, to our own suffering. The situation may not be the same, but the emotions may be.

The book of Lamentations has two voices. One is that of the observer. This is someone who speaks about the plight of Jerusalem from the outside. The second voice is that of someone who is experiencing the sorrow and suffering personally.

We are not going to go through this book verse-by-verse, although that certainly would be a worthy exercise. We are just going to look at the first few verses in chapter one. This is to get a feel for the emotions in this book

Chapter 1 starts out with the voice of the observer.

1 How lonely sits the city

The first emotion that we feel is Jerusalem's loneliness. How often in our own suffering is this our predominant emotion? As we are sitting there in our sorrow, we are thinking about how lonely we feel. No one understands us. No one can feel what we are feeling. That feeling of being alone weighs on us like a thick blanket draped over us. We can't get out and no one can get in.

That once had many people!

This place has a sense of excitement, of movement, of hustle and bustle. Shops with bright colors, stands with baskets of vegetables. People everywhere. There is much chatter. People are eating and laughing together at tables.

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But then you realize that this was in the past. Now there is no more excitement. Instead, there is destruction and loneliness. Where there was eating and laughter, now there is silence and sadness. What good there was, is gone. There is a heavy pervading sense of loss. There once were many people, but now... there are few.

That is how we may feel. Once we were young and healthy. We were only concerned with how much fun we could have. But now we are crippled: maybe financially, maybe emotionally, maybe physically. Once we had so many things. But now we have only this consuming sorrow.

She has become like a widow

If she is now a widow then once she had a husband, maybe a family. But now, those relationships are gone. That dynamic of giving and taking with others is gone. Now she is sitting there, crushed, alone. Celebrations have been replaced by memories. Plans have been replaced by survival. Celebrations have been replaced by mourning. Where there was much laughter, now there is lament.

In just the first half of the first verse, just the first sixteen words of this book we feel how a great dynamic city is now empty and struggling. So much is gone. This city has been hollowed out. The two dominant words are loss and loneliness. Sometimes we may feel the same. In our suffering and trials, we may feel like Jerusalem does here.

Just looking quickly at the next couple of verse:

**Who was once great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
Has become a forced laborer!
2 She weeps bitterly in the night,
And her tears are on her cheeks;
She has no one to comfort her**

She once was great. Again, the past tense. She was great, but not anymore.

- We once had health, but not anymore.
- We once had financial stability, but not anymore.
- We once had a good marriage, but not anymore.

She once was a princess; she was on the top rung. She was only one step away from queen. So close. Almost there. But now, she is a forced laborer. She is on the bottom rung. The fancy clothes have been replaced by rags. The tiara replaced with matted hair. Instead of being surrounded by servants, she is surrounded by garbage. The motivation now is not to get to the top. The motivation is just to survive, to not fall any further.

She weeps bitterly. The laughter is gone. The joy is gone. What is left is bitterness and sorrow.

God cares about those tears. We do not have to brighten up our act before coming before God or other people. We do not have to bring God our money or our sacrifices. Sometimes the only thing that we can bring to Him are our tears.

“She has no one to comfort her.” Is this because there truly is no one there offering to help or is it because she is not allowing anyone to come near? Is she pushing everyone away?

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In our culture when people are grieving, we leave them alone; we give them their space to work it out. In the ancient world it was customary for people to come and be with people in their grief.

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We see that in Job and we see that with God. He does not give us space unless we push Him away. Instead, He is near to us ready to bind up our afflictions.

We could go on and on like this, verse after verse, after all, this book is a lament, a dirge. But we want to focus on a few things.

First, the structure of this book. We looked at the structure in the beginning of this section.

This is probably the most deary, sorrowful book in the Bible. Yet it is also the most structured. The first four chapters are acrostic. In chapters 1, 2, and 4, each of the 22 verses starts with a different Hebrew letter and in order. Chapter 3 is essentially the same except that each three verses start with the same Hebrew letter and go in order for a total of 66 verses. Chapter 5, although not acrostic, also has 22 verses.

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I think that what this is telling us is that when we are struggling, when much of what we were used to has fallen apart, what we need is structure in our lives. We need routine, predictability. When everything else around us is shaken and unstable and confusing, we need that one steady flow, that one calm and predictable stream to move us along. We go to church every week. We read our Bible at the same time each day. We pray at the same time. Those are our pillars of strength.

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Structure in our day is like our skeleton in our body. It gives support and strength. So when something happens to another part of our body—we get cut, we pull a muscle—our skeleton keeps us upright and going. The same with our day. When things start to go pear-shaped, we have that skeletal strength of routine.

But structure does not mean unbendingly ridged. When we are in a trial, sometimes we have to zig when we wanted to zag. We have a health issue and we maintain our same routine every day, but then we have a setback and have to go to the hospital. Or we are being very careful with our finances, but then the car breaks down. We need to adjust for these setbacks, but the structure that we can maintain, gives us something to hold onto, something we are familiar with. And, many times, that gives us peace. It is a port in the storm. Even when we are in the emergency room, we can still pray and worship.

Finally, the fifth, and last, chapter does not have this acrostic structure. This may indicate that sometimes, no matter how hard we try, things may just go out of control. We did everything that we thought was the best and yet, here we are, in a deeper muck than before.

But if you look at two of the verses right near the end of chapter five, there is a little, hidden acrostic. Remember that the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters. Therefore, there is eleven letters in the first half and eleven letters in the second half. Verses 19 and 20 read:

**19 You, Lord, rule forever;
Your throne is from generation to generation.
20 Why will You forget us forever?
Why do You abandon us for so long?**

“You, Lord, rule forever...” starts with the first letter of the alphabet.

“Your throne is from generation to generation” starts with the eleventh letter of the alphabet which is the end of the first half.

“Why will You forget us forever?” starts with the twelfth letter of the alphabet which is the beginning of the second half of the alphabet.

“Why do You abandon us for so long?” starts with the last letter of the alphabet.

What might this be telling us? That evens when things are seemingly out of control, God is still there, giving you structure, holding you up. He may be hard to see and it may seem small, but that does not mean that He is not there. Even though God does not speak in this book that does not mean that He is deaf and blind to our suffering.

Could this be reading too much into something? Perhaps. But it is interesting to note, nonetheless.

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Theologian John Swinton said, “By learning the practice of lament, we become the type of people who take seriously the pain and sadness of the world but refuse to be crushed by it.”

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The book of Lamentations does not end with grief in a neat and tidy package and usually neither do our lives. But this is not where the Bible ends. From this point to the end of the Bible we read God coming to us, dying for us, and resurrection. We see a church starting, being scattered through persecution, and becoming the world’s most numerous religion. And finally, we see God returning and the saints standing before Him in all glory forever and forever. Our end is not grief. Our end is glory. We are a people of the resurrection.

I think that another point about this structure is that it shows that progress will, most likely, be step-by-step. If you are deep in a trial, it is doubtful that you will be sunk in mud up to your knees one minute and then standing on top of a sunshine bathed hill the next. Israel’s deliverance from Egypt took ten plagues and a long march through the desert. When you are struggling, set up a series of small, doable goals. Then as you accomplish each one, you will have a sense of progress.

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Kaizen (pronounced Ki-zen) is a Japanese term that derives from two separate words: Kai which means “change” and zen which means “good.” So it literally means “good change.” It is used to mean “continuous improvement.” It is generally used in a business environment, but here, we are applying it to our own individual lives or even to the community of people around us. The basic principle is that continuous, small, positive changes will lead to great overall improvement.

Some of its key practices are to:

[Slide for each of three points]

Eliminate waste: Do not spend much time on things which will ultimately drag you down such as pity-parties, resentment, isolation, and anger. It is OK to be honest with these emotions when you have them, and it is OK to tell God and others about them. But you should not wallow in them for long periods of time. They will drag your spiritual and mental life into negativity.

Encourage purpose: God did not create you to flop around like a fish out of water. Can you find purpose in something such as comforting someone else? Your purpose does not have to be grand and awe-inspiring every time. It can be something as simple as, “Improving in this area once again reminds me that, by the grace of God, I can be victorious and find hope even in the smallest of things.”

Pressing forward: When you do accomplish something, it is perfectly fine to feel good about it and bask in it. But do not “rest on your laurels” for too long a time. That was, more than likely, not your final stopping point. There is probably still much to accomplish. This does not mean that you are allowed to feel good for only three seconds and then you must clap your hands and get motivated for the next goal leaving that accomplishment behind as nothing more than a quick steppingstone. You can bask in it for a while. You can find peace and joy in it. When you are suffering, your most likely desire is to curl up and shut your eyes; not set up a series of goals. You do not have to plan out an entire course of action to get you through this trial. But at least think of one or two next steps and, when you accomplish one, use it to energize you for the next.

Some general attitudes to have:

[Slide for each point]

- 1) **Let go of assumptions and trying to understand why.** We can become paralyzed trying to figure out why something is happening to us. In certain circumstances that is useful. We are in financial distress; is that because we made some bad financial choices that we need to learn from? Our neighbor hates me; is that because I did something to offend him? Perhaps my dog keeps doing his duty in his garden. Why do I feel so lousy all of the time; is it because I eat too much junk food and do not exercise at all? But once we have exhausted our analysis and can't come up with anything, we need to give up speculating and blaming (ourselves and others) and move onto getting better.
- 2) **Be proactive.** Do not settle into a funk. Keep trying to get better. Make an effort. It does not have to be a profound effort, but at least do something. Take that small step forward.
- 3) **Do not be paralyzed trying to have everything be perfect.** Mistakes will be made. Learn from them and then do better next time. Thomas Edison failed 2774 times trying to invent the light bulb. But, eventually, he got there. There is always plan B. Jonah the prophet certainly messed up. He ran from God in disobedience and got swallowed by a giant fish. But I think that one of the key verses in the book is chapter 3 verse 1, “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time...” Notice that even when Jonah messed up big time, God came back and gave him a second chance. When we are suffering, we will make mistakes. But God will give us second chances and third chances, and 92nd chances. Just keep trying.
- 4) **Allow others to help.** Build a community around you. Go to a good church. Make friends there. Talk to counselors.
- 5) **Maintain a sense of value and worth.** No matter your situation, you will always be valuable to others, and, if not somehow, then you will always be valuable to God because as Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”** Never think that you are unworthy of victory. Never think that you are unworthy of success. Never think that you are unworthy of happiness.

A second interesting point is that at just about the exact center of this book, is the most positive message.

Lamentations 3:21-26

21 I recall this to my mind, therefore I wait.

22 The Lord's acts of mercy indeed do not end, for His compassions do not fail.

23 They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.
24 “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I wait for Him.”
25 The Lord is good to those who await Him, to the person who seeks Him.
26 It is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the Lord.

Notice that in all of Jerusalem’s tribulations, the foundation is the Lord. The Lord has

“acts of mercy”	Because maybe some of this is the result of our sin or that we have sinned in trying to deal with it.
“compassions”	Because at this moment perhaps more than any other in our Christian life, we need God’s attention. We need Him to relate to us, to sympathize with our weaknesses, to know that we are frail and like dust. In the Hebrew, the word “compassions” comes from the word “womb.” Warm, nourishing, safe, intimate.
“new”	Because our trials can come in waves, so, too, we need God’s mercy and compassion to come at us again and again. And they never run out.
“faithfulness”	Because we do not need a God who only shows up when it is convenient for Him. We need a God who is always there. Our God <u>is</u> always there.
“portion”	God is our allotment. It is He that will fill us up and satisfy us. Psalm 81:10, “Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.” It is not money, fame, power, or titles that ultimately satisfy us, but God.
“good”	God is pleasant and kind to those who wait for Him. When you wait for God, at the end, you will not get a stone or a scorpion. You will get something good.
“salvation”	Deliverance comes from the Lord. Maybe that deliverance will be for our negative or self-pitying thoughts. Maybe from our anger or bitterness. Maybe it will be a physical deliverance. Maybe a healing or relief. Maybe it will be deliverance from a situation.

Notice in these six verses the word “wait” appears three times.

God is not the fire department. He is not obligated to rescue us within minutes of our calling Him. We want to get out of the suffering now. God may have a better plan.

As was mentioned, this book is mostly an acrostic. It takes us from the beginning to the end in steps. But notice that even though the acrostic has a beginning, just as grief also has a beginning, this book also has an end. But in that space, give grief its place. Do not rush it. Do not try to hop over it. Do not hide it.

The answer to grief in Lamentations is not to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. It is to turn to God in His greatness.

13 Conclusion

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When we are suffering, we may feel angry, bitter, confused, helpless, hopeless, and perhaps, most of all, alone in a hostile wilderness.

But we can be confident that our beloved, Jesus Christ, will always be there with us, always be there to lead us out.

Remember **Song of Solomon 8:5**, “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?”

That is us leaning on our beloved, Jesus.

14 Appendix - The dilemma

This is the most philosophical part of the entire series. And fortunately for most of you, it is the shortest.

Here is the problem.

God is all loving.

God is all powerful.

Then why is there suffering?

Here is the logic by those critical of God.

Logic 1: There is evil and suffering but God does not stop it when He can, therefore He is not all loving.

Logic 2: There is evil and suffering but God cannot stop it, therefore He is not all powerful.

Conclusion: Therefore, because there is evil and suffering in the world, God is either not all loving or not all powerful. We are not the problem; God is the problem. We suffer because God falls short.

A second possible conclusion is simply that there is no God.

What is the solution to this dilemma?

Theodicy is the justification or answer as to why God allows evil and suffering. Theos means “God” and dicy means “trial, judgment, or righteous.” Therefore, “theodicy” means “justifying God” or “Defense of God.”

Here are some theodicies.

The Atheist theodicy: There is no problem because God does not exist.

The Limited Attribution theodicy: God knows all of but only of what can be known. God is only as powerful as what power is available. I.e., He does the best that He can with what He has.

The Reincarnation theodicy: People suffer today because of how evil they were in their previous life.

The Contrast theodicy: We are only able to know and appreciate good because we can contrast it to evil.

The Soul Making theodicy: We are created as incomplete souls in need of improving. As we overcome evil and obstacles, we develop and become better. This is like a video game where we “level up” each time we succeed.

The Best of All Possible Worlds theodicy: Of all of the possible iterations of creation, this one is the best that serves all purposes for both God and people.

We know that God hates evil. Proverbs 11:20, “The perverse in heart are an abomination to the Lord, but the blameless in their walk are His delight.”

If there were no suffering then we have to ask if pleasure and happiness are the greatest good? Is that the final goal, the litmus test as to how successful this world is? How can we be sure that a world that never had any suffering would actually a better world?

You can reply that heaven has no suffering, no pain, no tears yet it is considered a far better world than this one. It is what God promises to us as salvation from this broken world. But the difference is that in heaven the focus is on God and not on pleasure. Revelation 21 and 22 is the most concentrated and vivid picture of heaven and we see over and over that the focus is God:

Chapter 21

3: Behold, the tabernacle of God is among the people

6: I am the Alpha and the Omega

7: I will be his God

11: having the glory of God

22: for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple

23: for the glory of God has illuminated it

Chapter 22

1: the throne of God and of the Lamb

4: they will see His face

5: the Lord God will illuminate them

But what verse are we most familiar with? 21:4, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes...” When we think of heaven is our first and primary thought about being where there is no pain? Then we are missing the point. Heaven will be so glorious not because we have no tears. Heaven will be so glorious because we will see the face of God. Maybe the real reason as to why God will wipe away our tears is so that we will see Him better.

The dilemma is a head scratcher because our focus is on what makes us happy with the two key words: us and happy. If we are not utterly and completely happy, then there is something wrong with God.

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