

Series: The Dilemma of Suffering: Letting God bring our joys to weep and our griefs to sing
Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 11:25-28, 12:7-10; Philippians 4:4-13 **Key Word(s):** Help, Peace

Our series for Lent is called, “*The Dilemma of Suffering: Letting God bring our joys to weep and our griefs to sing*” (derived from a poem by [George Herbert](#) called, “[Joseph’s Coat](#)”). While utilizing several sources, we’ve based this series on a well-researched book that you may want to read called, “[Walking with God through Pain and Suffering](#)” by Tim Keller. We’ve presumed the inevitability of suffering, taken the subject seriously, and learned how the Christian worldview is the most nuanced and comprehensive lens for processing our pain. The key verse we’ve been meditating on is Psalm 34:18: “*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.*” In lesson 1 we heard how **the biblical worldview offers the most comfort to hurting hearts**. Lesson 2 was about how **we can trust a God who walks through the fire with us**. Lesson 3 taught us that **if there’s no God, then suffering can’t be repurposed for good**. In lessons 4 and 5 we discussed how **people need loving listeners, not miserable comforters** and how **a true friend goes the extra mile with those who sufferer**. We’ll wrap up our series by exploring this bizarre...

BIG IDEA: God wants to help us make the most of our suffering.

Understandably, suffering is often thought to be an inconvenience, or a waste of time, or a thing to avoid. Nobody puts it on their vision board or aims for it in a valedictorian speech. We would rather deny, think positively, go to our happy place, empty our minds, or take a vacation. While a temporary reprieve can help, our problems are happy to wait until we’re done. More importantly, God isn’t a fan of mind-numbing resolutions which don’t require faith in Him. Now, if ever God had an “*expert*” on suffering, it was the Apostle Paul. In Acts 9:15-16 God said, “*...he is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*” In Acts 14:22, Paul said that it’s “*through many tribulations that we may enter the kingdom of God*”, and he documented his painful encounters throughout his letters (cf. Romans 8:35; 1 Corinthians 4:9–13; 2 Corinthians 4:8–9; 6:4–5; 11:23–29; 12:10).

Let’s read one of his lists in *2 Corinthians 11:25-28*: “*3 times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. 3 times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers and from robbers, danger from my own people and from Gentiles, danger in the city, in the wilderness, and at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart*

from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.” While we all might question God’s call after far less trouble, check out **12:7-10** where Paul shared a remarkable perspective he gained after having a conversational prayer with God: **“To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 3 times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”** While Paul related with many of our experiences, he didn’t view trials as a sign of God’s displeasure. Why not? Because his relationship with God in Christ was based on grace, not fear. In 2 Timothy 1:7 he said, **“God did not give us a spirit of fear but of power, love, and self-control.”** Fear causes us to only see the bad in trials (i.e., God is judging me/them, this makes me/them look bad). Grace, on the other hand, reminds us that God loves us, that Jesus died for our sins, and that the Holy Spirit uses even our worst moments to help us know and become more like Him. In his book, *“The Weight of Leadership”* Ed Khouri said, **“Each of us must find safe people who can handle our weaknesses and struggles with compassion. The truth is, we all need grace, and God knows an honest awareness of our weaknesses will keep us dependent on Him for it.”** We need friends like Paul who realize that suffering drives us to God, that grace is the only remedy for our weakness, and that our trials should never be wasted.

In one of his letters, which he wrote from a prison cell, Paul shared **2 principles of a grace-based mindset** which can help us through any trial. Let’s read from **Philippians 4:4-7**: **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand (near); do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** That’s **Principle #1: Peace comes by practicing thankful prayer**. Naturally, we think peace comes only AFTER understanding or resolution, but supernaturally, we believe peace comes not from circumstances but from a person. Since God is always near and with us, peace is always accessible! Applying this faith-knowledge will enable us to thank God and rejoice WITHOUT demanding any specific outcome. Keller also reminds us: **“Rejoicing can’t strictly mean ‘having happy emotions.’ Nor can it mean Christians are to simply keep a stiff upper lip and defiantly say, ‘I won’t let this defeat me!’ That is a self-absorbed and self-**

sufficient response, acting as if you have the strength you need, when it will be found only in God. It is unrealistic and even dangerous.” (Keller, 252). This takes us to...

Principle #2: Peace comes by filtering our thoughts. In *Philippians 4:8-9*, Paul said meditate on **“whatever is true and honorable, whatever is just and pure, whatever is lovely and commendable, if there is any excellence or anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you’ve learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”** So, there comes a point when God expects us to repent and take responsibility for our thoughts. By faith, we must let outside perspectives from God and others help us process our pain. If you’re like me, suffering can send your mind down some wild and dark rabbit holes. I often try not to think when my mind keeps replaying painful experiences, but I’ve learned that is very dangerous. Do you know why? It’s because unfiltered ideas morph into “strongholds”, which the Bible defines as a thought that drives us from God and others in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5: *“The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”* As sin and Satan wage spiritual warfare on our minds, unchecked thoughts become like seeds that take root and grow into strongholds that ruin relationships. We isolate ourselves and form opinions we refuse to let go of, even when confronted with biblical reasoning. If we’re not careful, pain can turn into an idol of discontentment from which we feast. Thinking that we’re “in the right” can cause us to forget our duty to love others, to receive wise counsel, and to repent when necessary. Few things are worth ruining relationships, which Paul learned the hard way with friends like [Barnabas and John Mark](#). In this letter, he even thanked the Philippian church for bearing with him and being part of his support system! Listen to the secret Paul finally learned in *verses 10-13*: **“I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me...Not that I’m speaking of being in need, for I’ve learned in whatever situation I am to be content...I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”**

We hope this series has assured you that while suffering is inevitable and serious, the Christian worldview provides the most nuanced and comprehensive lens for processing our pain. While God hasn’t prescribed “steps to be followed in a certain order”, He offers us all kinds of “complementary strategies” and specialized tools. Over time, we can become like experienced mechanics who slowly develop our toolboxes and learn how to use the right tool, in the right way, at the proper time. **God wants to help us make the most of our suffering.** He is “near to the brokenhearted and saves the

crushed in spirit”, and if we’re patiently willing, He will “*bring our joys to weep and our griefs to sing.*” That great line from George Herbert’s poem, “*Joseph’s Coat*”, was inspired by Joseph’s story of suffering and redemption described in Genesis 37-50. Now that you have some hooks to hang the information on, be sure to read his story, along with the entire book of 1 Peter, which is a letter about Christian suffering. Ask God to help you apply what we’ve been learning and to develop you into the kind of person who, like God, never wastes an opportunity and is always willing to help others make the most of their suffering. Instead of trying to escape pain and trying to make it stop, faith helps us consider this great thought from a book called, “*Joyful Journey*” by Jim Wilder: “*Healing is not the absence of pain rather it is the presence of God and His continuing involvement in our lives.*”

Let’s pray: Father, while preparing this lesson, you kept reminding me of this line from Psalm 23: “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*” Your constant presence, even in our worst moments, proves that no experience is ever a waste because you can redeem anything. Thank you for never being distant, even when it seems that way. Teach us to abide in Jesus--to seek our validation and comfort from Him rather than from people and circumstances, so that we can truly begin to experience the joy of our salvation. Amen.

So, what’s your NEXT STEP?

- Remember, our next step always begins with faith in Christ. Either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Either way, His Spirit will help you.

Preparing for and applying suffering sermon #6.

- Take a deep breath and ask God to speak to you as you read 2 Corinthians 11:25-28, 12:7-10 and Philippians 4:4-13. Share a few of your impressions and takeaways from these passages.
- Share some examples of how you’ve typically responded to pain and suffering. What have you learned in this lesson that could help you in the future? Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-9 and consider this question: “Are you as graceful with yourself and others as Jesus and His disciples were?”
- Based on your normal responses, are you a grace-based person or a fear-based person? How do grace and fear respond differently to the problems we encounter in ourselves and in others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us about many other resources.

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Equating truth with comfort:** I realize not everyone equates truth with comfort but listen to something else Paul said in Romans 8:18: “*For I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.*” What was he doing there? Reckoning, considering, and weighing God’s promises against his present situation! So, for example, isn’t it all-together game-changing if Jesus truly is the Son of God, and came to earth as one of us, and lived a faithful life, and died in our place, and was resurrected by God’s power, and is now seated in power and glory at the right hand of God? Yes, it is! Paul said so in 1 Corinthians

15:12-19 where he argued that if all this (the gospel) is untrue “*then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain...and you are still in your sins. Those also who’ve died in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*”

- **Trusting God in darkness:** “How can I be sure he’s present and filled with goodwill toward me, even when I sense nothing but darkness? Here’s how...It was Jesus who truly experienced the ultimate darkness—the cosmic rejection we deserved—so that we can know the Lord will never leave or forsake us (Heb 13:5). Because he was truly abandoned by God, we only seem to be or feel to be abandoned by him. But we aren’t, despite our failures.” (Keller, 250)
- **The greatness of God:** “If God were small enough to be understood, he wouldn’t be big enough to be worshipped.” (Evelyn Underhill)
- **Self-control requires practice:** 2 Timothy 1:7 says, “*God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.*” Self-control is listed as a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, which means it’s a quality we must learn as we grow in Christ.
- **We need to use all of God’s tools:** “Some Christian writers point emphatically to the complaints of Job, the criticisms of Jeremiah, and the Psalms of lamentation as the right way for believers to process their pain. Other writers of a more conservative and traditional temper argue from other passages in the Bible that we must always trust God’s unfathomable wisdom and sovereignty. The fact is that both sets of texts are in the Bible and they are both important.” (Keller, 255).
- **Some practical advice from Bob Villa:** “Whether you’re a veteran weekend warrior or a newcomer to home improvement, you’ll get nothing done without reliable tools you can wield with confidence. But rather than buy a comprehensive set of tools all at once, opt instead to build your collection gradually over time, so you can give due thought to each purchase. As you deliberate over which are the right tools to buy for the tasks at hand, bear in mind these words of advice from an expert.”
- **Helping those who have done wrong:** As we’ve learned, God gives us permission to be good listeners and to feel another’s pain without assuming and correcting {the obvious} up front. No doubt Job had some sin in his life, but it wasn’t the root cause of all his suffering. So, even if there is sin in someone’s life--and there will be--we can still listen, empathize, and refrain from passing judgment. Sometimes fear can lead us to think we must give an answer, which makes us wonder if Job’s friends opened their mouths, in part, because they were afraid to “condone” whatever they perceived as Job’s problem or sin.
- **Not trying to fix people:** What’s the first thing you do when someone is crying? Hand them a tissue and insinuate they need to stop. Instead of giving people permission to weep or feel, we shut them down maybe because it feels awkward or uncomfortable. Advice can be used in the same way when we undermine or short-circuit the process to spare the hurt. A lot of us want to immediately help someone fix their problems for a variety of reasons (some of them good - we don’t want to see them suffer). Sometimes though, our efforts to “fix” can make someone feel like they’re the problem, or worse, that they must have problems in order to get our attention.
- **A word about spiritual warfare:** Satan’s loves to overwhelm us with misinformation, so we have no idea what to believe. I’ve come to realize that I am terrible at remembering truth when I’m hurting, so I’m learning to lean into people who are safe and trustworthy that will let me get my wild ideas out of my head and help me filter them. I realize that pain makes it hard to focus, but Scripture says that we’ll find peace not by thinking LESS but by thinking MORE about the right things. Instead of reducing our worlds, it can help to enlarge our thinking and

ponder life's bigger issues such as: *“Who made me and for what purpose? What has God promised us in Christ? Where does God want us to focus and invest our limited resources?”*

Quotes related to the larger context:

- **Perspective:** Dr. Paul Brand, a pioneering orthopedic surgeon in the treatment of leprosy patients, spent the first part of his medical career in India and the last part of his career in the United States. He wrote: *“In the United States ... I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it.”* (Keller, 16)
- **Our good desire to find meaning:** Anthropologist Richard Shweder says, “The desire to make suffering intelligible is one of those dignifying peculiarities of our species...” That is, one of the things that distinguishes us from animals is that we do not simply squeal under suffering and seek to flee it. We search to find some point in the pain and thereby to transcend it, rather than seeing ourselves as helpless cogs in a cruel machine. And this drive to find meaning in suffering is not only dignifying, it is indelible. (Keller, 21-22)
- **Why God withholds certain details:** “If God actually provided an explanation of all the reasons why he allows things to happen as they do, it would be too much for our finite brains. Think of little children and their relationship to their parents. Three-year-olds cannot understand most of why their parents allow and disallow what they do. But though they aren't capable of comprehending their parents' reasons, they are capable of knowing their parents' love and therefore are capable of trusting them and living securely. That is what they really need. Now, the difference between God and human beings is infinitely greater than the difference between a thirty-year-old parent and a three-year-old child. So, we should not expect to be able to grasp all God's purposes, but through the cross and gospel of Jesus Christ, we can know his love. And that is what we need most.” (Keller, 121-122)
- **Suffering is a key Bible theme:** “Finally, as I grew in my understanding of the Bible itself, I came to see that the reality of suffering was one of its main themes. The book of Genesis begins with an account of how evil and death came into the world. The book of Exodus recounts Israel's forty years in the wilderness, a time of intense testing and trial. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is largely dedicated to the problem of suffering. The book of Psalms provides a prayer for every possible situation in life, and so it is striking how filled it is with cries of pain and with blunt questions to God about the seeming randomness and injustice of suffering. In Psalm 44, the writer looks at the devastation of his country and calls, ‘Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?... Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?’ (Ps 44:23–24) The books of Job and Ecclesiastes are almost wholly dedicated to deep reflection on unjust suffering and on the frustrating pointlessness that characterizes so much of life. The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk give searing expression to the human complaint that evil seems to rule history. New Testament books such as Hebrews and 1 Peter are almost entirely devoted to helping people face relentless sorrows and troubles. And towering over all, the central figure of the whole of Scripture, Jesus Christ, is a man of sorrows. The Bible, therefore, is about suffering as much as it is about anything.” (Keller, 5–6)

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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- Paul E. Billheimer, Don't Waste Your Sorrows (Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade, 1977).
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- Ed Khouri, The Weight of Leadership: How Codependency and Misplaced Mercy Undermine Life and Ministry (<https://illumifymedia.com>, 2022)

Direction for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Go for a single, not a home run.
3. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Some great resources for digging deeper into community group life:

How life together looks <http://austinstone.org/stories/film/item/140-missional-community-lukes-story>

Rethinking what we do https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvWnXYSELF4&feature=player_embedded

Numerous articles to provoke thought <http://tod dengstrom.com/archives/>

What groups of 2-3 might look like <http://tod dengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LTG-Overview.pdf>