

Title: What I Have Been Learning

Text: Various Texts

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Proverbs 4:8 tells us that *"God's wisdom, if it is highly prized and embraced will honor and exalt you."* And so, if you have your copy of God's word with you this morning, and I hope you do, please turn to 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. And I want you to turn there this morning because I'm going to give a message that's very different than the ones I normally give. In fact, I don't think I've ever given a message like this. I'm not going to teach through a passage this morning and I'm not even going to give a normal topical message per se. I'm going to share with all of you today some lessons that the Lord has been teaching me lately in hopes that they will be helpful for you even as they've been helpful for me. And perhaps even inspire and encourage you to take note of what the Lord is teaching you in your own personal lives through your circumstances and trials.

See, as many of you know, I've been dealing with some health issues lately to such a degree that with the exception of one Sunday as I was looking at it, I've been out of the pulpit since mid-June of this year. And for a large portion of that time, especially from the end of June to the end of August, I was primarily laid up in bed or on the couch due to what the doctors have now determined as a kidney and colon infection. One that, because it was untreated likely for so long, caused swelling and pain through my body, severe nausea, dizziness, lack of appetite, and just kind of always gave me a debilitating fatigue and exhaustion, along with many other symptoms that I cannot mention among polite company.

So, during the worst of it, I couldn't read, I couldn't write, I couldn't think, I could barely speak, I couldn't listen to anything. All I could do for some days was just lay there unmoving for days at a time and sometimes for a week. And now, Lord willing, I am on the mend, and I will slowly be getting better with the help of the doctors and supplements and physical therapy. But needless to say, these past several months have been a trial of endurance for me. And I could have just ignored it and gone right back to the Gospel of Luke, which I was half tempted to do. Or I could acknowledge the fact I've been gone for a while. And when things happen like this that are unexpected, you can sometimes sit there and say, was there any reason or purpose for this? And I want to at least try to encourage you, as I share what the Lord has been teaching me, that at least in the life of your pastor, there was a reason why this happened.

One of the things that scripture teaches us is that times of trials are always times of teaching. God sends trials our ways to get our attention so that we might grow. The psalmist reflected on this truth when he writes in Psalms 119:67 & 71. *"It was good for me that I was afflicted so that I might learn your statutes."* *"Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word."* And again, Psalms 94:12 says, *"Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, whom you teach out of your law."* Times of trials are times of teaching. And I want to acknowledge that this morning during the service as your pastor, that during these last three months, God has been teaching me some things. And I want this sermon and this message to be

an encouragement for you if you're going through a trial or a hardship, that God is sending you through this trial so that you might learn something and to be on the lookout for what he's teaching you.

Over these last three months, God has been teaching me some things. I remember many hours of looking up at the bedroom ceiling or the emergency room ceiling or the CAT scan ceiling, CAT scan room ceiling, thinking, OK, God, I'm here. You have gotten my attention now. So, what do you want me to learn? Because I know you're wanting to teach me something. And during those, there were the hardest weeks, about four of them in the middle of this process, certain truths and lessons started being formed in my mind as I struggled to meditate on scripture in light of my circumstances, truths and lessons that I would repeat to myself in bed so I wouldn't forget them. Well, as God would have it, right in the middle of the most difficult week, God gave me two hours when I could think. And immediately I grabbed my journal and quickly wrote down a list titled What God Is Teaching Me. And I was able to write down 10 things that the Lord was teaching me before I began to feel sick again.

And those 10 truths is what I'd like to share with you this morning, 10 truths that the Lord is using to comfort and to correct my heart. And that's what I'm going to share with you today in hopes that they will be a comfort to you and to inspire you to think upon what the Lord is teaching you for yourself, because this is what we're supposed to do. When times of trials prove to be times of teaching, we are to take that comfort that we have received, and we are to do what? We are to remember it for ourselves and then we are to pass it on to others. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comforts, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted from God."* One of my favorite passages of scripture there. And that's what I want to do this morning as your pastor who has providentially been taken out of commission for the last couple of months is I want to comfort you with the comfort with which I myself have been comforted by God.

And so, this this morning is going to be what I as your pastor have been learning. But before we go any further, let's take time to pray.

Father, I thank you so much for the opportunity we have to meditate on your truths. Father, I thank you that you are such a good God, merciful and gracious to your children and that every event and moment of our life is performed by your loving hand. So that we might become more like Christ, that we might worship him more truly so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Father, I pray that you would I pray that you would encourage us as a church this morning as we consider how you comfort us during trials so that we might be on the lookout for the moments of mercy that you extend to us each and every day. So that we truly would be able to heed your word and give thanks in all circumstances, knowing that this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. We ask that you would strengthen us for this task this morning.

In Jesus name, amen.

So, the first thing that I've been learning is this first thing that I wrote down in my journal is a man at his best is just a man at best. I am weak physically, emotionally, and spiritually, often at the same time. Friends, if you haven't realized it yet, to be a human is to be weak. We are dependent creatures, completely reliant upon the continual sustaining power of the God who has created us. Our strength and our very existence is always and only just a mere expression of God's own decreed will. We have no existence, and we have no strength in ourselves. God is the grounds of all things, even you. As Psalms 46:6 declares, *"he utters his voice and the earth itself melts."* If God should, so will it all the universe would suddenly melt away into nothing and there is nothing that you and I could ever do about it at all. And how much more is this true when it comes to us? Truly, did Jesus say in John 15:5, *"apart from me, you can do,"* what, *"nothing."* No exceptions given.

Friends, you and I as humans are weak. This is one of the things that I have been learning. Up to this point, I honestly didn't understand the severity of fatigue when it accompanies physical illness because I've never had to deal with it before. I understood pain to a degree, and I've dealt with that. At least with pain, if it becomes too much, I've been able to just take an unhealthy amount of Tylenol and Motrin and push through it and move on with my life. But to be laid out on your back for weeks, incapable of doing anything and not even knowing why you can't, I've learned something. I am learning something. I am learning that I as a human have ascribed to myself far too much strength and ability, which belongs only to God himself. Because I as a human am weak. I am weak physically, emotionally, and spiritually, often at the same time. As I have felt like I was at the end of myself physically, the Lord exposed many issues of my heart and my life that I had never seen before, many idols that I hoped in and trusted in. And God had to bring me to a point of weakness before I could see any of that. And he knew it all along.

Psalms 103:14 says, *"God knows our frame; he remembers that we are but dust."* And Isaiah 40:30 declares, which we just read, *"Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted."* Strength and energy has nothing to do with age. Don't assume it, young people. Nor does it have to do with youth or physical fitness or anything. It has everything to do with God's sovereign, uplifting, sustaining power. And so, if you are here this morning alive and under the sound of my voice, you can take no credit for that. You have much reason to give thanks and praise and glory to God because as Psalms 3:5 reminds us, *"he alone has sustained you."* And so that's one of the things that I've been learning. I'm weak physically, emotionally, and spiritually and often at the same time.

And the second thing is like it, which is time and energy are limited and they should never be assumed or misused. It's humorous to think about it now, but I remember June arriving and telling myself, all right, I have got a packed summer ahead of me. Chara and I have our 15th wedding anniversary trip coming up. We've got two family trips this summer. Some major ministry and family transition is happening this fall and a new electric chainsaw just begging me to clear out all the honeysuckle in my backyard. It's going to be great by the time this summer is ended we're going to have experienced some of our best family memories. I will have engaged in some of the most exciting pastoring work of my life and my backyard is going to be featured in better homes and gardens. It's going to be great.

Guys, I couldn't even take a hike with my wife on our anniversary trip. I was in bed for most of my parents' 50th wedding anniversary celebration. We had to cancel our family's summer trip. Our backyard became something to hide rather than put on a magazine cover. To put it bluntly, I've been learning some things. Namely, time and energy really are limited and should never be assumed or misused. As the poet Robert Burns so famously said, the best laid plans of mice and men so often go awry. We have no idea what's going to happen in the next moment, let alone the next month. As James says, come now. This is one of the last passages I taught before I got sick. It's like the Lord wanted me to learn this or something. *"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit' - yet you don't even know what tomorrow will bring. For what is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'"* Truly, does Proverbs 19:21 declare, *"Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purposes of the Lord that will stand."* Time and energy are limited and should never be assumed or misused. I got a taste of this.

With perhaps a few exceptions, I don't even remember hardly anything from the end of June to the middle of August. Time became paradoxical for me, where hours would go on for eternity and weeks would pass by in a moment. I see the Lord's gracious goodness in all of this. As the psalmist says in Psalms 39:4-5, *"O Lord, make me to know my end and what is the true measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! For behold, you have made my days like a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you."* And again, Psalms 90:12 says, *"Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."* Friends, you and I have no idea what tomorrow will bring. We have no idea how much time and energy the Lord has allotted to us. And therefore, we must make the best use of the time and the energy that God has given us in the present for His glory.

Which leads me to the third thing that the Lord has been teaching me. I am weak. My time and energy are limited. Therefore, when all things are stripped away, all that's left is worship and prayer and the scriptures you can remember. And that's the truth. When you're brought to the end of yourself physically and therefore emotionally and mentally, and you don't want to think in that moment about your circumstances or your weariness or your pain anymore. I mean, you are reminded of that on a daily basis. That is already dominating enough of your time and attention. You want in those moments to get away from all that. You want relief. You want to focus your mind on something that can settle your heart. That can bring you comfort and peace in the midst of distress.

Well, listen, nothing can do that but God alone. As Isaiah 26:3-4 says, *"You keep him in perfect peace whose mind has stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trusts in the Lord forever, for he is an everlasting rock."* Listen, no one else can give you calm in the midst of chaos except God and God alone. *"He is the one who,"* as Psalms 29:10 states, *"sits enthroned above the flood; he sits enthroned as king overall forever."* And so, when you are brought to the end of yourself during a trial or affliction, you don't want to be thinking about the flood of all of your circumstances or experiences in that moment. You want to look up and you want to think about God.

Well, listen, one of the things that the Lord has been teaching me is that in that moment of debilitating pressure and pain, when you're already caught up in the current of your circumstances, you can't suddenly decide at that moment to suddenly become a worshiper of God and a meditator of his truth. No, you either are in that moment or you're not. You either come into that trial with the tools that are required, or you don't. And I've learned that.

There was one particular day when Chara came into the bedroom and saw me looking intently at a packet of flashcards. She's smiling. She remembers this. Struggling to read what I had written on them. And she said, in only the way that my wife can, what in the world are you doing? And I said, I am trying to memorize these verses on hope that I had written down, but I can't. And she said, Zach, you need to rest. You either have verses memorized at this point or you don't. Just think about the ones you already know. And she was right. When everything else is stripped away, all that's left is worship, prayer, and the scriptures you can remember. The only thing you have during moments of trials is what you bring into them. And so, the time to grow in my worship of God and the time to cultivate my commune with God in prayer and the time to memorize scripture is not then, it is now. The only thoughts and affections of God that I will be able to hold fast to in trials are thoughts and affections that I develop now. The only confidence in prayer that I'll be able to exercise in the middle of trials is the confidence in prayer that I develop now. And the only promises and truths that I will be able to bring to mind in moments of crisis are promises and truths that I memorize now.

Indeed, when I come to the end of my life's journey and all things are said and done, all I'll have left in that moment is worship, prayer, and the scriptures I can remember. And so, if these are the only things that are left at the end of the day for any one of us, then these are the things that I should be focused on prioritizing in my life now. You and I have no greater priority in our life and daily living than to be a worshiper of God primarily through prayer and in meditation of His truth. Because when all things are stripped away, all that's left is worship and prayer and the scriptures you can remember. And that is the third thing that God has been teaching me.

It doesn't matter what's on your to-do list for the day. Make sure the thing that always gets done is that you spend time worshiping God, talking to Him, and meditating on His truth. Which is the fourth thing that I learned is that everything on the altar must be laid and I hold back far too much for myself. With the exception of those four most difficult weeks, one of the characteristics of these last few months would be that my health would go up and down in a way. I would think for a day or two, I'm finally getting better. And then for the next instance I would be laid out for the next couple of days, and this would happen over and over and over again. And during this process the Lord started to show me something that even though my time and energy are clearly limited, I used up far too much of it in pointless things of vanity that do not eternally matter.

God would bring me down to the point where all I could do was worship, pray, and meditate on His word. But then in the moments when He gave me a measure of strength, I realized I would start defaulting towards filling up too much of those moments of strength with mindless vanity and activities like news or

media or entertainment. God started showing me this over a cycle of rinse and repeat. That time and energy is limited, and the tendency of my heart is to try to reserve far too much of it for myself.

Why is it that when I'm laid out on my back, I offer up my life as a living sacrifice to God in worship and prayer and meditation on His word, but then when I have energy, I seek to use that for myself and neglect the most needful duties and delights of the soul? Friends, everything on the altar must be laid, for we hold back far too much for ourselves. Just as Jesus says in John 9:4, *"We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work."* In other words, there is a time of rest coming for the people of God, but friends, it is not this day. Today is a day of salvation. Today is a day of gospel harvest. Today is a day of preparation. These are the final days before the holidays. So as the Lord gives you strength and energy today, use it in the worship of Him.

As Ephesians 5:15-17 states, *"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil."* Don't be foolish. Understand what the will of the Lord is. Take time today to sing. I don't care if your voice sounds terrible. Take time to sing. Take time to pray. Take time to think about God's word. For time and energy are limited. The worship of God is why we exist, and we often hold far too much back for ourselves. Everything on the altar must be laid, for we are to be living sacrifices to the Lord. That's the fourth thing that the Lord has been teaching me.

Fifth, calming Christian hymns are essential for the soul. Now don't get me wrong, I love a good rousing praise chorus. There are many times when my soul needs to be energized for courage called to battle and stirred up in zeal and admiration for my God. But listen to the words of Psalms 94:19, *"When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations, O Lord, cheer my soul."* One of the best ways our souls can be comforted with the truths of God's word is through music. Music is one of the most effective means to communicate truth to our hearts. As Colossians 3:16 teaches, *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,"* how, *"by teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,"* how, *"by singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."* Tunes are one of the best ways to communicate truth. And I have rediscovered that over these last few months.

Just as we need music to encourage and embolden us in living out biblical truth, we also need music to comfort and console us in believing it as well. That is why I say calm and Christian hymns are essential for the soul. There were several days during these last few months and a week in particular where I could hardly move or talk or think. Listening to normal conversation was too draining. Listening to normal music that was loud or fast was too exhausting. And even listening to a normal song where they were singing with lyrics in it was too tiring. Guys, I couldn't even listen to bluegrass. And I love bluegrass. Eventually, I was brought to the point where the only thing I could handle besides silence was listening to calming instrumental hymns. I found a three-hour YouTube video and listened to it on repeat for several days. And that is why I say calming Christian hymns are essential for my soul. Hymns that calmly reminded me in the midst of my hardship of truths like these.

These are some of the songs I listen to on repeat.

Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not.
As Thou hast been Thou forever will be.

Or

This is my Father's world:
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.

Or

Every joy or trial
Falleth from above,
Traced upon our dial
By the Sun of love.
We may trust Him fully,
All for us to do;
They who trust Him wholly
Find Him wholly true.

Or

He leadeth me: O blessed thought!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
it still is my God that leadeth me.

Or all the words of this song, even though I'll just give one stanza.

Day by day, and with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.
He, whose heart is kind beyond all measure,
Gives unto each day what He deems best,
Lovingly its part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling toil with peace and rest.

And you've got to look up the rest of the song. The other two stanzas are fantastic.

By the way, friends, all of these songs that I just read to you are in the hymn book that's in front of you. It's an excellent resource if you haven't studied it. That is why I say, calming Christian hymns are essential for the soul, because when the cares of our hearts are many, God's consolations cheer our souls. And so, learn rich, calming, comforting hymns now, so that even if you can't listen to lyrics, you know them in your heart and mind. So that they can cheer your heart later when you need them and when you cannot sing them for yourself.

Which brings me to the next thing that God has been teaching me, and that is that the prayers of others are needed when you cannot pray. Sometimes you can become so weak or exhausted or discouraged that you cannot coherently pray. And in those moments, the prayers of others are needed when you yourself cannot pray. And did you know that God Himself recognizes this fact, by the way? Romans 8:26-27 says this, *"Likewise the Spirit himself also helps us in our weaknesses. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, so the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."* Do you know what that's talking about? That means that God the Holy Spirit himself knows that we as humans will often come to a point of such weakness in our lives we will often come to a point where we ourselves cannot even pray. And in those moments when we cannot pray, we have a continual advocate, God the Holy Spirit himself, interceding for us.

Friends, we who walk in the Spirit are to follow him in that same ministry and to pray for others when they cannot pray for themselves. We see that in James 5:14-16, where James writes, *"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him.... and pray for one another, that you may be healed."* Listen, there were some days when I was so sick and tired that I couldn't pray. I didn't have the mental focus. And yet there were so many people that came over and visited or sent me texts or phone calls or even cards and letters expressing their prayers over me. And it was exactly what I needed.

Can I say, brothers and sisters, first, thank you so much. And then second, don't stop. There are others in this body that need that same ministry of prayer. I'd encourage you that if you know someone in our body that is weak and weary and wounded, reach out to them and pray for them and over them if you can this week. Pray a prayer over them, whether it be in person or over the phone or by text or by letter. Even Moses' hands grew weary and needed Aaron and her to hold them up. And how much more do we need each other in the battles of life? That's one of the things that I've been learning through the ministry of you all. The prayers of others are needed when you cannot pray.

Which brings us to the next point, which is visits may be tiring to the body, but they're never to the soul. You know, when God first created Adam, he stated in Genesis 2:18, *"It is not good for man to be alone."* We as humans are not isolated beings. We need each other. There is a special benefit that comes through being in fellowship with another image bearer of God. And this is especially true when it comes to us as Christians. Matthew 18:20 says, *"where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them."* There is a special refreshment that comes to our souls when we fellowship with other believers, other living stones in this household of faith. That's why Paul says in Romans 1:11-12, *"For I long to see you."* Right face to face. Why? *"That I may impart to you some spiritual gifts to strengthen you - that is, that*

we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." There is a strength and an encouragement that comes through being in each other's presence.

And that's why scripture tells us to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the habit of some. There is something about being around other believers, and that is something that the Lord has been teaching me. Even on my worst days, I was glad when someone visited me. It was one of the things that I would hold on to and remember and think about as the next wave of weariness and illness would come over me. I would think about the person's words and their smiles, their stories, their jokes, their prayers. I may have been exhausted afterwards, but I never regretted it.

So, I want to encourage you. Friends, if there is someone you know in this church who's been laid up because of health reasons and hasn't been able to make it to church, I'd encourage you to reach out to them and ask to visit them for a few minutes. It doesn't have to be long, but just show up, say hello, ask how they're doing, and pray for them. You won't regret it, and neither will they, because visits may be tiring to the body, but never to the soul. And this is one of the things that the Lord has been teaching me as your pastor. Unless you think that you have to keep on talking and fill the silence while you visit, you don't.

Which brings me to the next point the Lord taught me, which is this; restful silence with friends is one of the most meaningful comforts during times of distress. You know, sometimes someone who is struggling doesn't need to hear from you so much, as much as they simply need to see you and be seen by you. I mean, even Job's friends, who were miserable counselors, they still sat with Job seven days and seven nights on the ground in silence before they said anything, because they saw that his suffering was very great. That was fantastic, by the way. It was when they opened up their mouths that they became terrible. But when someone is suffering, one of the best things you can do for them is just be there.

During these last few months, there was one night in particular when some friends came over to the house, and I couldn't do much that moment, but it meant so much that they were just there. And then afterwards, we just set up some lawn chairs in the front yard, and we watched a storm roll in, like good Midwesterners, I might say. When I was up for talking, they would talk with me. When I wasn't up for talking, they would just sit there with me and enjoy watching the storm clouds come in. It was one of the most meaningful comforts at that time, because rather than rushing off to do all these things that I'm sure they had to do, they cared for me enough just to sit with me and do nothing. That's why I say, don't worry about whether you have everything right to say, like a band-aid for every problem. But just go and visit your friend in distress. Just go and sit with them in that moment and show them that you care. Because restful silence with friends is one of the most meaningful comforts during times of distress. This is one of the things that the Lord has been teaching me.

But I think the most significant thing, and I'm on my last two points, don't worry. I think the most significant thing that the Lord has shown me over these last several months, which is what these last two points are related to, is God's great mercy. These trials have shown me the great mercy of God, first, that I am wholly dependent on the mercy of God. My realization of this truth has deepened because of this, and

I am thankful to God for it. See, during the worst days of this illness, I remember I was lying in my bed struggling to pray, and all I could say in that moment was just, help me, over and over again. I was so dizzy. I had brain fog. I couldn't think. I could only speak three or four words at a time. I hadn't been able to eat that day, and I'd been trying to. I was the whole day experiencing full body tremors and aches, and this was after a month and a half, and everybody kept on telling me I was in the best health of my life.

And in that moment, one of the instrumental hymns that started playing on my phone was,

Pass me not, O gentle Savior
Hear my humble cry
While on others Thou art calling
Do not pass me by

And it reminded me of the account of the blind and lame beggar in Luke 18:38-39, where when he heard that Jesus was passing by, he started crying out over and over again, *"Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"* Lying on that bed too weak to move, I felt a little bit like that blind beggar. No one knew what was wrong with me, let alone be able to help me. No one, that is, except Jesus. He knew, and the only way I would ever get better, the only way I could endure, even if I didn't get better, was if Jesus in his mercy chose to help me. I didn't deserve it. Just like that blind beggar, all I could do is ask him for it. If Jesus chose to help me, it was his choice. If he didn't, it was his choice as well. And I realized I am wholly dependent upon the mercy of God.

And so, I just started praying the prayer of the beggar, *"Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me."* And you know what? I wasn't praying that prayer for two minutes before I was struck with this comforting thought and wonderful realization. Jesus did not pass him by. Jesus is merciful. He drew near to that man who was crying out to him, and he showed him mercy. And Jesus hasn't changed at all. He is still that wonderful, merciful Savior, precious Redeemer, and friend, who scripture says is rich in great and abounding mercies that never end. Jesus hasn't changed. He is still that gentle Savior who does not pass us by, who shows us mercy every morning, mercy that we are wholly dependent on.

Which brings me to the final lesson that I've been learning through all of this. Which is this; God gives moments of mercy during seasons of suffering. And these are the moments to remember and to call to mind. Amid our struggles and heartaches, we need to remember that Jesus has not passed us by. He hasn't gone anywhere. He is with us forever, even to the end of time. Indeed, he is with us, and he is being merciful to us, even in the midst of our afflictions. And this is the realization that my merciful God is present and active in the midst of my affliction that helped change my entire outlook on my trial.

Suddenly, listen to this, suddenly, I was no longer waiting for the mercy of God to come. I was no longer waiting for the mercy of God to come. I was now looking for the mercy of God that was already being given. And there's a big difference between those two statements. Suddenly, I realized that this season of suffering that I was going through was absolutely filled to the brim with moments of mercy that I hadn't been recognizing up to that point.

That yes, even though I had been sick all day, God still gave me those two hours where I felt good enough to go and sit in the back room and be with my family. A moment of mercy. That yes, even though I was still nauseous and dizzy and had no appetite, God still enabled me to keep my food and drink down today. A moment of mercy. That yes, even though I wasn't able to make it to church, God still brought that member of the church to make it to me. A moment of mercy. And that yes, even though I had to leave that conversation that I was enjoying early, God still gave me the strength to have that much of a conversation with someone. A moment of mercy. And that yes, even though I have done nothing but lay in bed all day, God has still seen fit through this illness to make me tired enough to be able to sleep tonight. A moment of mercy.

Today, the sun shined that I might have something beautiful to look at. Today, my tremors stopped for a few hours that I might get some rest. Today, a dear friend brought us food that I might be able to pray for them while I try to eat. Moments of mercy during seasons of suffering. Everywhere I looked, I kept seeing moments of mercy during the seasons of suffering. It started me wondering to myself, I wonder what moment of mercy is going to come tomorrow. It completely changed my outlook on everything. And through this, God was teaching something immensely practical. God always gives us moments of mercy during seasons of suffering so that we might endure.

And by the way, Christians have long recognized this. In fact, the very day that I wrote down these ten things in my journal, I had enough energy to close the journal and I opened up Pilgrim's Progress, which I had tried to start reading before all of this happened. And guess what? The next page that I was able to read was Christian climbing the hill of difficulty. And it tells me there, as John Bunyan writes, that as Christian was struggling to make it up the hill of difficulty, and as he was about to give up all strength, behold, he saw an arbor placed halfway up the hill, a garden trellis by which the travelers might find rest. Put there by the Lord of the city that they might endure and renew their strength along the way. What was John Bunyan teaching? He was teaching that God always gives moments of mercy during seasons of suffering so that we might endure. And these are the moments that we are to remember and to call to mind. Not the hardships, not the circumstances, not the suffering, but the moments of mercy.

As Lamentations 3:20-23 states, *"Though my soul continually remembers my afflictions and my wanderings, and is bowed down within me, this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness."* Moments of mercy every morning to endure seasons of suffering. Boy, it's so good! I wonder what type of mercy God is going to show me today. What moments of mercy will he give today in this season of suffering so that I might endure another day? These are the moments to remember, to write down, to continually call to mind. Moments of mercy during seasons of suffering. So, these are just some of the things that I've been learning lately, and I wanted to share all with you today.

Times of testing are always times of teaching, and in light of these past few months, I wanted to reflect that publicly for you as your pastor, and I want to encourage you, if you are going through a hard time, to write down what the Lord is teaching you as well. To hold on to those comforts for your own soul and for

the good of those who are around you as well, to share with them. These are some of the things that I've been learning, so I want to finish with this.

How about you? I'm not the only one that's going through trials. Some of you are going through trials far, far worse, far worse than anything I've experienced. So, what have you been learning? I would like to know. I think your brothers and sisters in Christ would like to know as well. Your family members would. What have you been learning lately? What comfort has the Lord been comforting you with? I'd encourage you that comfort and mercy is not designed to stay with yourself. It is designed to be given to others. Again, as 2 Corinthians 1:4 says, *"God comforts us in all of our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort others in their affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves have been comforted with by God."*

Now we'll have an opportunity, by the way, to start doing that corporately on Sunday nights starting next week through our times of thanksgiving testimony so that even if you're attending, if you haven't signed up to participate in that part of the service, I'd really encourage you to do that. It would be great each week to hear about and to share what we've been learning concerning the great comforts and mercies of our God. So that opportunity is coming up. But even more fundamentally, if there is a member of this church body that you know is going through a difficult time right now, I'd encourage you as the one that God has appointed to equip you to do the work of the ministry, I'd encourage you to reach out to them this week, perhaps in some way that I have described already this morning.

See if you can meet with them, to at least be with them or pray with them or if you're able, sing a song for them or just tell them what's going on in your life. Just share with them something encouraging that God has been doing. I want to assure you; you will not regret it and neither will they. Unless you try to sing and your singing is really bad, no. You won't regret it, and neither will they. For when the cares of my heart are many, your consolations, O Lord, cheer my soul. Our God is a God of great comfort and mercy and we who are his sons and daughters should spread his comfort to those who are weak, weary and in need of it. So may God give us grace this week to be moments of mercy during other people's seasons of suffering, moments of mercy to remember and to call to mind so that they themselves might endure. This is some of what I've been learning. How about you?

Let's pray. And as the men come forward for communion as well, let's pray.

Father, I thank you so much for the opportunity we have to think about all these truths that you teach us during times of trials. Father, I think of how I am standing before an entire body of individuals that are being tempted and tested in so many ways that there is a variety, a vast variety of experiences that are sitting in front of me. And yet, Father, all of these individuals have the same God who is faithfully teaching and comforting and encouraging and being merciful to each and every one of them. Father, I pray as we are a body that we would speak the truth in love to one another, that we would be the hands and feet of Christ to each other, knowing that many times we can be those moments of mercy that help each other endure times of suffering.

So, Father, I pray that you would give us grace as a church body to spread your comfort and mercy around to others. Help us, Father, to be diligent in learning the lessons you would have us to teach. Help us to prioritize, Father, the worship of you today and fellowship with you and meditating on your word so that we might grow as we ought and be an encouragement to others. Father, I pray that you would equip our body in these ways to go about the work of the ministry for your honor and for the glory of Jesus Christ in our day. And Father, we thank you for your mercy extended to us today. Help us to never overlook it. Help us to always appreciate it and to give you the praise and the honor for it.

We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

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