

One of the foundations that I build my life and ministry upon is the truth that there is literally no area of my life that the gospel of Jesus should not have influence over – and that we as followers of Jesus will spend the rest of our lives partnering with the Holy Spirit to progressively surrender the totality of our lives. I pray that I NEVER become tired of searching out the depths of the gospel's implications in my life.

I believe that the gospel gives life to things that were once lifeless. To people that were once lifeless.

I believe that the gospel gives hope to that which was once hopeless.

I believe that the gospel gives joy where there once was mourning.

I think that all of us can offer a “yes and amen” to these ideas.

However, one area of confusion (and perhaps even deception) that I have seen within the church is in the area of suffering. Consider this question: “How should my belief in Jesus, in the gospel, change my view of suffering?”

There is what I would consider some dangerous teaching in the Church today. Teaching that is essentially telling Christians that because of faith in Jesus, our suffering here on this earth should be no more. As long as we believe in God, we will be financially secure and safe from any kind of harm, sickness, or suffering. At the end of the day, what God *really* wants for me is to be happy, wealthy, and well.

At the core, this line of thinking teaches us that the main purpose of the atonement – the death of Christ on the cross, was so that we would go through life happy, wealthy, and well.

I believe this is totally, completely false.

Hear me – I'm not saying that Jesus doesn't heal, that Jesus doesn't bless financially, that we should just be miserable Christians walking around with our heads to the ground. That is NOT what I am saying. What I am saying is that we MUST commit ourselves to a right thinking about what it means to be Christian and to suffer and endure in this world. If we are to be of any help to a world that is dark, broken, and dying, we MUST think biblically about suffering and learn to enter into the suffering of others as Jesus did.

Consider the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 7:24-27

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who builds his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.*

*And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.*

Notice that no matter where the man builds his house, on the sand or the rock, the storm still came. **Building your house on the rock, while obviously the best choice land, does not exempt you from the storm.** The question is not “if”, but “when.” When will the storm come? And how will I be found when it does? There is no such thing as building your house in a storm-free zone. That's the whole point of the parable – and that is the starting point for this message.

We live in a broken world – just in the past few months we've seen natural disasters, bombs, escalating wars, unbelievable tragedies. Sin causes suffering. Many of you are suffering due to the sin of others in your life – Christians and non-Christians alike! Look, my sin was paid for on the cross, and I no longer bear the weight of wrath. But does my sin still bear earthly consequences in the here and now? For myself and for others? Yes. (Just ask my wife!) And then there is our adversary – the devil. His mission could not be more clear from Scripture. Steal. Kill. Destroy.

SO at the end of the day, suffering is going to find us. And when it does, and maybe you are here RIGHT NOW, what are you going to stand on? How is belief in Jesus going to carry me through? I wholeheartedly believe that the Bible teaches:

*The mark of a Christian is NOT that he/she will be immune to hardship, suffering, and pain.*

*Instead, the mark of a Christian can be seen in how he/she endures suffering.*

The difference between non-Christians and Christians is not “suffering” and “not suffering.” It's purposeless suffering vs. purposeful suffering.

Before we get into the text, I do want to set a couple of quick ground rule disclaimers that we need to keep in mind.

- 1. Please know that my aim is not to minimize your suffering. Many of you in are currently enduring circumstances that the rest of us couldn't hope to understand. I do not want you to think that I am saying your suffering is not real. It is. Please don't compare your suffering to anyone else's.*
- 2. If you are suffering from any sort of abuse, whether psychological, emotional, physical, sexual, or any other kind of abuse, do not take away from this message that you need to simply endure that abuse. If you fall into this category, my hope would be that right now you can begin the process of coming out of that abuse and into freedom. So if that is you, please talk to someone – a pastor or elder at your church, a trusted mentor, or a close friend..*

With that said, let's go ahead and look to the Bible. A majority of this message will be a verse by verse walk through of 2 Corinthians 4 – one of the most thorough chapters on suffering in the Scriptures.

***2 Corinthians 4:1 - Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.***

We do not lose heart. This is my aim. In the midst of the world, of my sin and the sin of others, of the devil and his relentless attacks and lies – how do I not lose heart?

Perhaps that most important word in this verse is “therefore.” Whenever you are studying scripture and you see this word, please don't just keep reading. Context is EVERYTHING. When Paul is saying “therefore,” he is essentially saying “Because of the implications of what I JUST said, I'm telling you THIS.”

So in order to go anywhere into chapter four, we need to briefly go back and look at some things Paul has to say in chapter 3. And what Paul has to say in chapter 3 and the early part of chapter 4 will form the first major point of this message:

## **I. The Foundation for Suffering: My Sufficiency in Christ**

**2 Corinthians 3:4-6– *Such is the confidence we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim as anything coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to become ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit. For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.***

Paul here makes it EXPLICITLY clear that he does not find his adequacy or sufficiency in himself or his own abilities. It is the sufficiency of God, through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, that gives us sufficiency and confidence.

It is the imputed righteousness of Christ that gives us confidence and assurance. Not my ability to clean myself up. Not my ability to stand in front of people and teach the Word of God. It is not your skill level, your good looks, your financial security, your physical health, your job, your home. These are all good things, they are all good gifts from God. But they WILL burn up.

Every Christian is a minister of the new covenant. For some, that means a formal role in vocational ministry. Pastor, worship leader, missionary, Christian counselor, etc.

For many it means being a minister of the new covenant in a different sphere of influence: business, education, entertainment, service, etc. Regardless, whether you are the CEO or a janitor, you are a minister of the new covenant, and an ambassador of Christ. And your sufficiency is IN CHRIST. This is the bottom line – the foundation that we must learn to stand on in the midst of suffering. My circumstances do not define me. My job does not define me. My income does not define me. My education does not define me. My culture does not define me. My marriage does not define me.

GOD defines me in CHRIST. This is where my sufficiency and my identity are rooted. In Christ.

And while, as Paul makes clear, we are not sufficient in and of ourselves, and while there is nothing that we can give in and of ourselves, God still does a work in us. He doesn't leave us the way He found us.

**2 Corinthians 3:16-18 – *But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord, who is Spirit.***

So at the same time we are given new life in Christ, the ministry of a new/better covenant, the free gift of salvation through the work of Christ on the cross, God in his mercy and grace does not leave us where we are, does he?

I'm getting ahead of myself – let's go back to chapter 4: ***Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.***

So what we see here is Paul being able to say that he doesn't lose heart not because he is so tough, because he is so great, or because he has an uncanny ability to just pull himself up by his bootstraps and keep going – but because of the grace and mercy of God.

Straight up grace and mercy. If we don't get this, we aren't building on rock. Any time we trust in the work of our own hands or the righteousness of our own, we are building on sinking sand. Let's keep moving.

**2 Corinthians 4:2-4 – *But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.***

Paul states that his ministry, this ministry of the new covenant, is clearly based on the truth of the word of God. He is saying "Look, I'm going to tell you the truth. I'm not going to twist it, I'm not going to change it, I am going to teach you the word of God.

Paul wants his message to be crystal clear.

**2 Corinthians 4:5-6 - *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.***

As God commanded the light to shine in the beginning, so He graciously clicks on the light of our hearts so that we can see Jesus for who He truly is. Again, Paul is clear that he is not standing firm in himself. "What we proclaim is NOT ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

If you are **in Christ**, this is your testimony. The details may be a little different; the timetable on which this happened will vary from person to person. But at some point, God shined His light into your heart, giving light to the knowledge of God in the image of Jesus – the image that we were originally created in but was marred when sin entered through our parents Adam and Eve.

And the moment that we put our trust in Jesus as the propitiation for the wrath we deserved, we began the process of cooperating with the Spirit of God to restore that image in us. And we all, from glory to glory, are being remade into what was originally intended for us – to reflect the image of God. We are being transformed more and more into the image and likeness of the Son by the work and power of the Holy Spirit.

And even though we don't like to talk about it a lot, often the best molder of our images, the best chisel that is able to shape our character, is PAIN. Pain has a way of getting our attention. Of bringing to the surface some of the sin and darkness that is still lurking in our hearts. Consider the words of C.S. Lewis from his work *The Problem of Pain*:

*We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*

Many times in pleasure a certain numbness can set in. But in the presence of pain, we become acutely aware of our own inability to save ourselves – and in the presence of suffering and pain therein lies a divine opportunity to experience the presence of God and increase in the knowledge and character of God.

2 Corinthians 4:7 – ***But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show the surpassing power that belongs to God and not to us.***

And there it is. The treasure that is the gospel, that is our sufficiency **in Christ**, is being held in a jar of clay.

We are those jars of clay. I am that jar of clay.

The psalmist says it perfectly in Psalm 103:15-16 – ***As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.***

Listen, I don't care how far you can throw a football. How well you can play the guitar. How successful in business you are. How much money you have. How many Twitter followers you have. How tough you are – how many punches you can take. Your days are still like grass.

Jar of clay.

God places this treasure, the revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, in the lowly vessels that are us so that it might be apparent that the power of the gospel is from God and not from the vessel. Our sufficiency is not our own. At the end of the day, no matter how successful we are or no matter how good things seem to be going, we are jars of clay.

Fragile. Easily broken. Have you ever paused to just think about how fragile our lives really are? That the very fact that I woke up this morning and had life and breath was the very grace and mercy of God? And in the midst of this fragility, this brokenness . . . we suffer.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 – ***We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; . . .***

**Afflicted in every way.** Some translations say “hard pressed on every side.” These are those seasons of life where it just seems like life is piling on. If someone asked you what was wrong, you wouldn't name one thing, you would name ten.

School is really stressful, and my girlfriend just broke up with me, and my boss is really riding me hard, and my roommates always leave the room a mess, and I'm not getting much sleep, and my family is crazy, and I don't know what I'm doing after college, and Ricky Rubio got hurt, and the Twins are awful again. The walls are closing in.

**Perplexed.** In the original Greek, this word literally means to have “no way.” You're at a loss, confused, foggy. Understanding is not readily available for you.

Maybe you read your Bible and have a hard time understanding what you are reading. You lay awake at night because you can't switch your brain off. You think and ask questions that nobody seems to have answers to.

**Persecuted.** For many, persecution is real. Maybe not in the sense of getting stoned or whipped, or in being put on trial.

Some come from homes with parents or siblings who are not believers. Some go to work every week and encounter resistance to the way you live your life. Some have old friends that have abandoned you because you're not as much fun as you used to be. People just simply don't understand.

If you haven't experienced any of this – chances are HIGH that you will.

**Struck down.** These are those sudden circumstances that threaten to shatter your world. Cause you to question God's calling on your life. There is no way to plan for them.

You get fired from your job. Your parents are getting divorced. A sudden death of family or friend. You are sitting across the table from a doctor and you hear the words Hodgkins Lymphoma.

You can plan and prepare and give your best human effort, but at the end of the day you are going to find yourselves in the midst of storms that you just did not see coming. LIFE IS HARD. Thankfully, Paul doesn't sign finish his letter here with a "good luck!" Instead the text presents what I see as the two main purposes of God in our suffering in this world.

## **II. The Purposes of God in Our Suffering**

### **A. Relational Purposes of God in Our Suffering**

#### **1. Fellowship With Christ**

2 Corinthians 4:10-11- . . . *always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*

For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus was the model and the fuel for his ministry. In the daily dying we go through, in the affliction, confusion, and persecution that comes our way, we are fellowshipping in the suffering of Jesus.

In 1 Peter 4, we find out that while there may be many reactions to suffering, surprise should not be one of them:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Paul knew all about fellowshipping in the suffering of Christ. Later on in 2 Corinthians, Paul lays down the laundry list of his sufferings. Chapter 11, verse 24.

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger 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. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

Paul took seriously the call to take up His cross. He is a jar of clay and he knows it. He knew what it was to pick up his cross and share in the suffering of his Master. So in suffering, we are actually fellowshipping WITH Jesus. In suffering, we get to experience Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, Paul here has a revelation of how the death that he was experiencing could actually produce life in those around him.

## 2. Life in Others

2 Corinthians 4:11 – ***So death is at work in us, but life in you.***

Death is at work in us, but LIFE in you. Paul here seems to be indicating that while death (suffering) is at work in us, there is also an opportunity for life to be manifested in those around us. How? Read on . . .

2 Corinthians 4:12-14 – ***Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so also we speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.***

Paul is quoting Psalm 116 – Here is some more of the context of that text:

***I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ears to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me, the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!' Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. The Lord preserves the simple; when I was brought low he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling; I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. I believed, even when I spoke, "I am greatly afflicted."***

Paul quotes a Psalm that echoes the point he is making – namely the faithfulness and intentionality of God in the midst of pain, of weariness, of confusion. He is saying, “Even when the world is falling apart around me, even when I cannot see the path in front of me, even when it seems that everyone in my life is against me, I have a hope because I BELIEVE THE GOSPEL. If you are suffering, God has not abandoned you. He has not turned a deaf ear to you. He has not forsaken you. No, God has entrusted you with that suffering so that you might point others to Him in the midst of your circumstances.

No matter what you are going through right now, the gospel is still true.

So ask yourself some hard questions.

How would those around me describe my suffering?

Does my suffering cause me to look inward instead of God-ward?

Does my suffering drive me to complain? To gossip? To get angry? To get bitter?

Does it cause me to publicly dishonor people? On social media?

Am I suffering in a way that life is working in the people around me?

Am I calling on the name of the Lord in the midst of my affliction?

Do I believe and speak life in the midst of my pain?

Can I get my eyes off my circumstances so that I can enter into the suffering of the people around me?

And as you are broken and crushed, pray that the aroma of Christ would rise from your brokenness instead of the stench of bitterness and anger. Pray that the Holy Spirit would help you so that your conduct and countenance in the midst of it all would draw people to Christ. Suffering is relational. It points people God-ward. And it brings glory to God, not to me.

2 Corinthians 4:15 – ***For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.***

As I am transformed from glory to glory, as set my gaze on Christ through the hardship and through the pain and through the confusion and the foggy, as I put my trust in the future grace of God, people around you are moved by the grace that flows in and through your life. And as that grace extends through you to more and more people, it does what it is intended to you – to give glory to God.

That's what the cross does, that's what fellowship in suffering does – it frees us up from having to strive to make much of ourselves so that people around us (our father, our mother, our friends, kids, God) will accept us and love us. It frees us up to make much of God – to bring the glory to His name instead.

God has a relational purpose as he works through us, and he also has a personal purpose in pain in working in us in 2 ways:

## **B. Personal Purposes of God in Our Suffering**

### **1. Working Christ-likeness in Me**

2 Corinthians 4:16 - ***So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.***

Over and over again scripture shows us evidence of God doing a work **in** us.

In Hebrews we read that God is working "in us that which is pleasing in His sight." In Philippians we read that it is God who works "in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." In Romans 5 Paul states that the



suffering we are enduring is actually producing endurance, character, and hope in us. In Romans 8 Paul promises that all things are working together for the good of those who love God – going on to explain in the next verse that our “good” actually has nothing to do with material and physical blessing, and everything to do with conformity to the image of Jesus.

We have to get our eyes off of what we think it “good” for ourselves, and fix our eyes on what is good in God’s eyes – what he is working in us.

In your suffering, God is working in you.

Humility.

Compassion

Kindness.

Patience.

Graciousness

Peace

Tenderness.

Joy

Goodness

I would much rather that God renew my inner life through suffering than renew my outer life through comfort. God is working His image into you and into me through suffering. While working to restore His image in us, God is also doing something in us to give us a hope that is greater than anything the world could ever offer.

## 2. Working a Hope for Eternity in Me

**2 Corinthians 4:17 - *For this momentary light affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.***

As our suffering works the character of Christ into our lives, we increasingly become a people who have a greater capacity to enjoy God in this life, and who have a greater desire and yearning for the eternal enjoyment of God in the age to come. Suffering actually helps us to live life in light of eternity – it causes us to yearn for it.

You can see right away in chapter 5, immediately after talking about suffering, Paul says this:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened – not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

In suffering we are acutely aware that things are not as they should be. We see it in our own lives as our daily following of Jesus over the years causes our outer bodies – tents, as Paul calls them – to

literally waste away. We even see it in creation. Paul says in Romans 8 that the entire creation has been subject to futility – but that creation *itself* is groaning in eager anticipation for the restoration of ALL things. We, along with creation, seeing the destruction of everything worldly and are yearning for the picture that is painted for us in Revelation 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And He who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

Later on in Revelation 21 the text begins to describe the new Jerusalem, and this is how it describes the city:

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. But its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there.

And this, friends, is our future in Christ. This is the picture that Paul has in mind in Romans 8 when he says **“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us.”** Oh that we would be a people who can echo this statement with our mouths and by the way that we endure this age.

I pray that the Church would rise up as a people who see suffering as a divine opportunity for drawing people to Jesus, for forming the image and character of Christ in their lives, and for cultivating a yearning for the age to come.

Where do we go from here? To close, I want to offer some practical steps that we can take.

### **III. Application**

#### **1. Pray with FAITH**

We serve a God who is able to heal, who is able to rescue, who is able to redeem any and every circumstance.

Is it wrong to pray for God to intervene? No.

Is it wrong to pray for healing? Absolutely not. I wholeheartedly believe that we should.

Is it wrong to pray for God to change our circumstances? No.

Jesus prayed in the garden – “Father, let this cup pass”

Paul prayed that the thorn sent by God would be removed.

We need to pray in faith, however at the same time we MUST . . .

## 2. Surrender with CONFIDENCE

When Jesus prayed in the garden, he added a tagline: “Not my will, but Yours be done.”

We serve a God who knows what He is doing.

Often I think that we approach prayer the wrong way – we feel like we have to twist God's arm or convince him that we have enough faith so that He can grant our miracle.

I don't see prayer that way.

I believe that we are to make our requests known to God, but that the goal of prayer is not to convince God that what we think is best. Instead, the goal of prayer is that we would be convinced that what GOD thinks is best.

That prayer would be a tool to change our minds, not God's. So as we bring our requests to God, we can surrender with confidence knowing that He knows the highest good.

He is not asleep at the wheel. He is not guessing. He is not being taken by surprise at what is happening. He KNOWS.

He is good. Surrender with confidence.

## 3. Gaze with INTENSITY

Suffering and pain usually causes us to focus inward – on ourselves, on our circumstances, on our sin, and the people or things causing the pain. And when our focus is on these things, progress is going to be hard to come by.

Scripture, however, paints a completely different picture of where our focus needs to be.

Over and over we are commanded to fix our eyes on Jesus.

2 Corinthians 4: Look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.

2 Corinthians 3: And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

Colossians 3: Seek the things that are above, where Christ is. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Stop hyper-focusing on your suffering, on your circumstances, and start focusing on your Savior.