

The Gift that Nobody Wants: Finding Joy in Suffering
Session III (Rejoicing in Real Life)

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Now that we have established the joyful truth that God is sovereign over all things, we are ready to tackle the gift that nobody wants yet everybody receives: Suffering. The title of our Conference is *Rejoicing in Real Life*. I think we all know what is meant by "real life," don't we? It's suffering. Is it really possible to rejoice in suffering? That's the topic of this session.

Before I start talking about suffering, let me first define it. I like how Elisabeth Elliot explained it:

"Suffering is having what you don't want, and not having what you do want."¹

That pretty much covers it, doesn't it? And yet, since God is sovereign and ordains everything that happens to us for our good, this means that we may rightly say that suffering is a gift. In the end we will find our deepest desires satisfied in all of God's gifts to us, and that includes our suffering.

We are going to consider the problem of evil, why it is a good thing that God allowed it into the world, how Jesus comforts us in our suffering, and why we *can* rejoice in real life.

Let's begin with the problem of evil. The book of Ecclesiastes has a lot to say about living in a fallen world that is:

A World Subject to Futility

According to rabbinic tradition, Ecclesiastes was authored by King Solomon. Whoever the writer, he calls himself the Teacher or Preacher. As a new Christian I fell in love with this book, because it seemed to tell my story. Like Solomon, I had "refused my heart no pleasure" (2:10), yet he found (and I found) that "everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind, nothing was gained under the sun" (2:11).

Life in this world is meaningless, the Teacher says, because "what has been will be again, what has been done, will be done again, there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). Not only that, "There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow" (1:11). Everything passes away, only to repeat again, and even human beings are soon forgotten.

The sad fact is that we do not live forever in other people's hearts as the obituaries so often

¹ <https://lucindamcdowell.wordpress.com/2019/06/19/what-elisabeth-elliott-told-me/>

profess, because when those who knew *us* die, there is nobody left to remember. Meanwhile, life under the sun is a weary path of toil. Day follows day, we suffer, we die, and we can't figure it out. That's why the Teacher says, "meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless" (1:2).

The word translated "meaningless" is the Hebrew "hebel." It means something like "breath," or "vapor," as in life is a mere vapor, and then it's gone. Our life experience frustrates and disappoints us. Good people suffer while the wicked prosper. Wise people and foolish people both end up in the grave. Everyone we cherish we will eventually lose to death. And then we too will die.

For life to have meaning, it should not end and be forgotten. To have meaning in life, we must be connected to the eternal, the opposite of our transient, vaporous lives.

Therefore:

Death Is Our Greatest Enemy

Michael Wittmer, in his book on death, *The Last Enemy*, writes this: "Sin is the enemy that will one day steal from us everything and everyone we have ever loved" (Ch. 10), and "Death is the big zero that negates everything" (Ch. 11).² The first Adam brought death into the world. The last Adam, Jesus Christ, destroyed death by his own death. Jesus reversed the curse, and in giving us eternal life he also gives life meaning. Jesus not only conquered death but forced it to work for our good, so that Paul could exult: to live is Christ, to die, *gain*.³

However, we live in a culture that increasingly rejects God, so this sense of meaninglessness increasingly permeates our society. People are told they get to make their own meaning, and many try to do this, but it never works. Reality does not bend to human will. And what difference would it make anyway? Nothing lasts. The grave awaits. Without God, a person has two choices: despair or denial. Most people choose denial. They simply don't think about it.

When I was a child of seven or so the reality of death hit me, and I began to try to imagine myself not existing, which of course I couldn't. Death troubled me greatly and I asked my dad about it. He replied, "It's a long way off. I don't worry about it and you shouldn't either." Denial. As a teenager, a friend whose father was dying told me, "Every day I tell myself he won't die today. And I'll only be wrong once." And that denial strategy worked, until it didn't.

This is I believe how most people deal with the horror of death. It's like we have all gone parachute jumping with faulty parachutes. Halfway down, we can still convince ourselves "Hey, I'm doing fine. I'm flying!" If pesky thoughts of death come to the surface, we tell ourselves I won't die today. And whaddaya know? We don't! Until one day, we are wrong.

² Michael Wittmer (2012). *The Last Enemy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers.

³ Philippians 1:21

To the extent that people do think about death, they tell themselves a falsehood. One unbelieving friend told me, "Death is a natural part of life. I'm not concerned about it." I don't believe her. Everyone, even atheists, has a sense that life is a precious gift to be cherished, and that death is horrible and *unnatural*. When my mom died, for months it seemed so strange that a living person could just disappear, while things, mere *stuff*, like furniture and paper and photos, still existed. It just felt so wrong. We aren't supposed to die.

Unlike other creatures, we can contemplate our own death. A medieval Christian concept encouraged this with the Latin phrase *memento mori*: "Remember, you must die." Apparently denial is not a new human response to mortality! To refuse to remember is to refuse to deal with our predicament. Moses wrote "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). When we contemplate our death, that helps us see the immense value of each day of life we are given. We are reminded to make the most of our short time on this earth, and I would suggest, to get serious about being happy, for we may not receive another day to enjoy.

Not only is death our greatest enemy, but we live in a world of unspeakable evil. Is this too, meaningless? Perhaps not.

What the Existence of Evil Tells Us

The problem of suffering and evil has been with us since the beginning. It's one of the main reasons young people and adults leave the faith, including some recent well-known evangelicals. We need to take this question seriously for ourselves and for our children's sakes. We need to give them and ourselves reasons to hope in God.

Some interpret suffering and evil as proof that we live in a cold, indifferent universe without God. Others chirp, "Everything happens for a reason," even though they literally have no reason to affirm this. Some try various forms of pagan spirituality to try to gain some power over evil. New Age types deny that evil exists at all, calling it an illusion, and saying our problems stem from not recognizing that we ourselves are divine. This is the view of Marianne Williamson, currently a Presidential candidate. New Age has gone mainstream.

More honest people are tempted to despair. It's no surprise that the farther we move from God culturally, the more suicide we see. Suicide is an act of despair, a complete loss of hope. Ironically it is still a quest for happiness, or at least an end to unbearable pain. Blaise Pascal wrote, "All men seek happiness...This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves."⁴

We all have to face up to unexplained suffering and evil. What does scripture say about it? We know that after Adam and Eve disobeyed God, death entered in to the world, and ever since the whole creation has lived under God's curse. Why did God allow this? And why did God

⁴ <https://www.epm.org/blog/2013/May/27/seek-happiness>

curse not only our first parents, but the whole human race and the cosmos itself? After all, he set this up. It was his plan to do so from the beginning.

Romans 8:20 tells us that “the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope.” It is God who subjected the creation to the futility described in Ecclesiastes. Why? John Piper in *Desiring God* suggests this:

The miserable condition of the world today – its futility and corruption and groaning – are owing to the judicial decree of God in response to sin. Therefore, the meaning of all the misery in the world is that **sin is horrific. All natural evil is a statement about the horror of moral evil.** If you see a suffering in the world that is unspeakably horrible, let it make you shudder at how unspeakably horrible sin is against an infinitely holy God. The meaning of futility and the meaning of corruption and the meaning of our groaning is that sin... is ghastly, hideous, repulsive beyond imagination....Unless you have some sense of the infinite holiness of God and the unspeakable outrage of sin against this God, you will inevitably see the futility and suffering of the universe as an overreaction. But in fact the point of our miseries, our futility, our corruption, our groaning is to teach us the horror of sin. And the preciousness of redemption and hope.⁵ (boldface mine)

I am sure that I am not the only one who has wondered at what seemed like an extreme reaction to Adam and Eve’s tiny little sin of eating a piece of fruit. I have also often rationalized my own sin as not that bad. How much bigger a picture could God give us than the entire universe groaning under the weight of that simple (but not small after all) sin, and still we tend to consider sin a trivial thing. We keep forgetting that every sin, however small, is tantamount to spitting in God’s face. Jonathan Edwards wrote: “All sin is of infinite proportion, and it is more or less heinous depending upon the honor of the person offended. Since God is infinitely holy, sin is infinitely evil.”⁶ Puritan Thomas Case commented “A small sin shows greater contempt for God, since we dishonor him for an insignificant thing (as we count it).”⁷ For minor temptations that that would be relatively easy to resist, we seem to have no problem dishonoring our Creator. In Case’s view, falling to a really powerful temptation would be more understandable.

We so easily presume on God’s grace, failing to do what we know we ought or doing something we know we ought not. When I was a counselor at the pregnancy center, I’ll never forget the Christian girl who told me that she knew it was wrong to abort her baby, but she was going to do it anyway, because God would forgive her. The implication was kind of, that’s his job. This is a temptation for all of us. Do we disobey God to make our lives easier, knowing he promises to forgive?

⁵ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/subjected-to-futility-in-hope-part-1>

⁶ <https://www.the-highway.com/articleDec97.html>

⁷ Richard Rushing, ed. (2009). *Voices of the Past*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust. (164)

So one purpose of ongoing evil in the world is to teach us and to keep reminding us to hate sin, to see the damage it does, to long for an end to it, and to get serious about killing our own sin.

God subjected all of creation to futility, but he is also rich in mercy. God subjected it all in hope. In hope for what? Romans 8:21 goes on to say, “in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” This corruption will end at the return of Christ, and the creation, along with us, will be set free. And of this, Paul writes, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). So we have hope. Evil will not have the last word. God’s glory will triumph.

But still we ache under God’s severe judgement against the human race and all of creation. We still wonder why God chose to do it that way. Why did he allow sin into the world in the first place? Is he not then the author of evil? After all, he let Satan tempt Eve. Isn’t he responsible for her temptation then? James tells us no. “Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (1:13-14). OK. But God did set up the system. How is that he is not responsible for the evil that came into it, even if he did not directly tempt Eve?

This question has been debated from the beginning. Theologians have offered different explanations. For me, Augustine of Hippo, the fourth century theologian and author of the first spiritual biography ever written, *Confessions of St. Augustine*, has been a great help in thinking about this.

Understanding Sin & Evil: Insights from Augustine⁸

In his early adult life, Augustine rejected Christianity and explored all kinds of spirituality, lastly as a Manichean, which was a school of philosophy that believed in two opposing cosmic powers, one good, and one evil, duking it out. After Augustine converted to faith in Christ, he began rethinking this question of evil and how a good God who rules the universe could permit it. He came up with an original and, I think accurate, way to explain it.

Augustine said that evil is real, but it is not a *thing* that exists in and of itself. Instead, evil is a parasite on the good. God created the universe and called it good. Therefore, he reasoned, goodness is a property of everything that exists. To the extent that anything exists at all, it has at least some goodness, because being (or existence) in itself is good.

When something good is corrupted, it loses some of its goodness. This is what we call evil. Evil is simply spoiled good. It describes something missing or marred. Evil is like “a hole in goodness.” Or a stain. This makes sense out of Jesus’ words when he said to his listeners: “You,

⁸ <https://www.str.org/articles/augustine-on-evil-.Xcbql797mlM> (Ideas in this section quoted and summarized from this article)

being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children” (Matt 7:11). He meant not that we are nothing but evil, but that we are marred by sin, we are corrupted by this parasite of evil. Augustine put it this way: “Evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name “evil.” It has no existence in and of itself. It is NO-thing.

This helps us understand how it is that evil can exist without God creating it. When Adam sinned, he corrupted the good, and evil came into the world. It was Adam’s doing, not God’s. (Human beings have immense value because they are made in the image of God,⁹ and yet each person is born corrupted by sin such that “no one does good, not even one.”¹⁰ Except for Christ, the second Adam, every human being has followed in the first Adam’s disobedient footsteps.)

By the way, Augustine’s father was a pagan and his mother Monica was a believer. She prayed passionately for her son for many years, as he had no interest in the Lord and lived a pretty dissolute life. But God answered her prayers. So, mothers of children who have walked away, take heart and keep praying for your children.¹¹

Even so,

Why Did God Allow Evil? (And Why We Can Be Happy That God Allowed It)¹²

Often people say that the existence of evil shows there isn’t a God, because why would a good God allow it? But you look at it from the other side, the existence of evil is evidence for God. If there was no God then whatever happened would be just what is. There would no sense of right and wrong. Animals don’t agonize over evil. They are material beings. They accept the world as it is.

Human beings are not that way. We are made in the image of God, and instinctively feel there is something very wrong with the world, and this itself points to God. The question of evil and why God allows it to persist is a deep question and requires a lot of wrestling, and none of us fully understands.

But consider this: what if it is only by allowing evil into the world that the greatest possible good could come? Certain attributes of God can only be displayed in the existence of sin and evil: patience, mercy and righteous wrath, for example. Without evil we could not know these aspects of God’s character.

The same applies to human virtues. Apologist Greg Koukl writes: “certain virtues couldn't exist without evil: courage, mercy, forgiveness, patience, the giving of comfort, heroism,

⁹ Genesis 1:27

¹⁰ Romans 3:12

¹¹ <http://www.breakpoint.org/2006/05/son-many-tears/> (Bishop Ambrose told Monica “it is impossible that the son of so many tears should perish.”)

¹² <https://www.str.org/articles/augustine-on-evil#.Xcbql797mlM> (Ideas in this section quoted and summarized from this article)

perseverance, faithfulness, self-control, and long-suffering to name a few.” Without the battle against sin and evil, we could not develop these virtues in ourselves, nor would they ever be seen because they would not be needed.

Koukl goes on to say:

A world that had never been touched by evil would be a good place, but it wouldn't be the best place possible. The best of all worlds would be a place where evil facilitated the development of virtues that are only able to exist where evil flourishes for a time. This would produce a world populated by souls that were refined by overcoming evil with good. The evil is momentary. The good that results is eternal.¹³

So we see that it really is a good thing, at least in these ways, for God to allow evil into the world, because what results is far better in the long run.

And the scripture teaches us that God comforts us in our affliction. Paul calls God “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3).

The Comfort of Christ

What is our comfort? First and foremost, it is the gospel. The gospel is GOOD NEWS for us to believe, to stake our lives on. Believing the gospel unites us to Christ, and enables us to receive comfort from the promises given to us in the Word of God. 1 Corinthians 1:20 tells us: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ.” In Christ, all of God’s promises become ours, and this is what allows us to suffer in hope. (Note: biblical hope is not wishing, the way we usually use the word. Biblical hope is sure; it means we expect it to happen, though we don’t know exactly when.)

The word “comfort” comes from Latin. “Cum” means “with,” and “forte” means “strength,” as in “fortify.” God fortifies us. He gives us strength. God’s comfort is not a “there, there poor you,” but a strengthening in the Holy Spirit.

Some of our affliction is imposed on us by events outside of us. Much of our affliction comes to us in our battle against our own sin. My biggest problem is me. Don’t you hate your sin? I hate mine. I don’t always hate it enough to do something about it, and that’s a problem too. Suffering brought on by my sin motivates me to put it to death.

Once we believe the gospel and are reconciled to God through Christ, then the life-long process of sanctification begins. As we feed on the Word, fellowship with other believers, and live each day by faith, little by little our hearts are formed to become more and more like Christ, and little by little we overcome evil with good. It is a continuing change worked by the Holy Spirit in us, freeing us from sinful habits and forming in us Christlike affections, dispositions, and virtues.

¹³ Ibid.

Our goal is to be more and more conformed to the image of Christ, until our sanctification is complete and he takes us to be with him. But let's be honest. Killing sin is painful. Our sin nature doesn't want to die, nor does it want to experience discomfort of any kind, or any affront to its pride. This makes walking with the Lord a difficult path. G.K. Chesterton wrote: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."¹⁴

But why does our life in Christ have to be so hard and so painful? Dorothy Sayers was a fiction writer and essayist and friend of C.S. Lewis. She was also a woman intellectual which was unusual for her day. And she was a sinner: at age thirty she had a child out of wedlock who was adopted by a family member. She knew suffering and her own sin. But she knew Christ. Of him she wrote:

for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is – limited and suffering and subject to sorrow and death – He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with His creation, he has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death...He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.¹⁵

Whatever evil human beings are subject to, however much suffering God brings into our lives, God the Son subjected himself to that same evil. Jesus is the perfect servant leader, who does not ask of his followers anything that he has not first done himself, only much worse, since he took the wrath of his Father against all of our sin onto himself, so that we would never have to experience it. Our guilt is removed; our future assured. Oh, what a wonderful God we have!

But, you may ask,

What Kind of Suffering "Counts?"

The Bible is clear that walking with Christ means we will suffer. Philippians 1:29 says, "it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake." The question arises, what does it mean to suffer for his sake? Does only suffering directly related to our faith "count"? Like that experienced in ministry? Being mocked or rejected perhaps? Losing a job? Losing your life? That's what I was first taught. Garden variety suffering just comes with living in a broken world; it doesn't count for the kingdom because believer and unbeliever alike suffer in this way.

¹⁴ <https://www.chesterton.org/the-christian-ideal/>

¹⁵ <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/sayers-greatest/sayers-greatest-00-h.html> (Read the whole essay! Amazing!)

This notion comes, I think, from that lower view of God's sovereignty, the one that wants to protect his reputation by insisting he does not ordain suffering or evil. But as we have said already, this would mean our suffering in the world is random and purposeless. How depressing!

To go back to the Roadrunner metaphor, when I was living with this view, I not only lived in anxiety about when some metaphorical safe would fall on my head, but I was depressed to think that not only God had nothing to do with it, but it wouldn't even count as suffering in God's eyes.

Well, I don't think that's right. In a world where God ordains all that comes to pass, for the believer there is no distinction between "spiritual" and other kinds of suffering. I like the way John Piper puts it: "all suffering that comes in the path of obedience is suffering with Christ and for Christ – whether it is cancer or conflict."¹⁶

If we suffer in faith, hope, and obedience to the Lord, that counts for the kingdom. Romans 2:6 promises us this: "God will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life." Note that Paul does not condemn our desire to receive glory, honor, and immortality. He commends it. It's good to seek reward *from God* by persisting in doing good. His praise is all that matters. I want to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter in to the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:21). Don't you?

The Bible mentions many kinds of suffering and none of it is dismissed as unimportant. Jesus relieved suffering from illness, disability and demons. God has compassion for all kinds of suffering, with special concern for the poor. Psalm 68 calls him "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows...God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing" (v. 5-6). God has compassion on the hurting.

And the day is coming, as we are told in Revelation 21, when Christ returns and destroys his enemies forever, when God will make all things new, set up his kingdom, and God himself "will wipe every tear from (our) eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (v. 3-4).

But for now, we suffer. How shall we then live? Let's talk about:

Rejoicing in Real Life (Ecclesiastes, Ground Hog Day, and me.)

Ecclesiastes reminds us that we are born into a world that doesn't work right. "It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with" (1:13). In other words, a bad day is normal! We keep expecting things to go well and are shocked and upset when we

¹⁶ John Piper (1996). *Desiring God*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press. (216)

have problems, but the truth is that we should expect problems every day. The time to be surprised is when everything goes right! Recognizing this fact alone can ease some of our suffering, at least our continual frustration at the never-ending stream of problems. So how do we live joyfully in this broken world where nothing works as it is supposed to?

Let me tell you about my favorite movie: *Groundhog Day*.¹⁷ Have you seen it? I've watched it several times and love it more every time. Eventually I realized it is a modern version of Ecclesiastes. The story revolves around a selfish and obnoxious weatherman named Phil, played by Bill Murray, who does obnoxious better than anyone. He goes to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to cover the Ground Hog Day festivities. Phil disdains this assignment in a small town full of hicks, as he sees them.

He stays the night in a hotel and when he wakes up, he discovers that it is the same day as the day before. Exactly. Same alarm in the morning playing Sonny & Cher's "I Got You Babe," same people saying the same things, same events. This continues day after day in a kind of nightmarish time loop. Nobody else seems to notice this. He's all alone in this insanity.

At first he thinks, "Hey, this could be fun. I can do whatever I want without consequence." He binge drinks, drives like a maniac and indulges in one night stands. But that only depresses him. So, he tries to commit suicide, but still he wakes up just the same. He even kidnaps Punxsutawney Phil, the groundhog he suspects may somehow be behind all this, and drives off a cliff with him. But this too fails.

Since he can't even die, Phil has to figure out how to live. If he has to live the same day over and over forever, he decides that he will start helping other people, and this changes everything. By the way, all this time there is a woman producer named Rita that he has been interested in. Rita wanted nothing to do with the old Phil. But she takes notice of this new Phil. At last something changes for Phil: he gets to spend a day with Rita. Phil tells Rita that he is happy no matter what happens, because he loves her. Of course, that breaks the spell. He escapes the time loop. He awakens to a new day, with Rita.

This movie reminded me so much of my own life. For most of us most of the time, the biggest challenge to our happiness is the daily grind of life. Every day we get up, get dressed, work all day whether in a job or at home with children; we also have to cook, shop, clean, do laundry, etc. Life has a lot of repetition. We fall into bed exhausted at the end of the day, then get up and do it all over again. This can be soul-deadening as we look ahead to days and years of the same old thing. *Ground Hog Day* displays for us one aspect of discovering happiness in a world of apparently meaningless repetition: by embracing our lives as they are, committing ourselves to enjoying what we have, and loving the people around us.

There are many other kinds of suffering other than the daily drudgeries of managing life. In this room are people going through very hard things: chronic pain, raising kids with disabilities,

¹⁷ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107048/plotsummary>

widows, divorcees, difficult marriages, serious or terminal disease, family members caught in addictions of various kinds, people whose kids have rejected Christ, people whose kids won't speak to them, others who are longing for children but infertile, still others who want to get married but see no prospects, people who are deeply lonely, financially strapped, the list of things that cause us suffering is seemingly endless, not to mention the suffering we cause ourselves and others by our own sin. And yet we are told without qualification to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

I became quite ill as the summer began and I thought to myself, "I am so miserable, I don't see how I can be happy in this. Already I feel like a hypocrite planning to talk on how God makes us happy, because I can't think of a single thing that would make me happy as long as I feel this bad." Then I began to think about things I could rejoice in. Since I expected to recover, I could be happy in that, and thank God for a body that can fight off viruses, and that one day I will have a body that doesn't get sick any more. And I asked God to use this trial, small as it was, to conform me more to Christ by teaching me patience and thankfulness. So while I was not feeling happy, I thanked God for everything I could think of, and reminded myself of his promises of future relief and joy. I made myself happy in the Lord as best I could.

I also thought about how much harder it would be if I was ill for more than a week. Say for months or years like some of you. This was so humbling and convicting. So many live with that reality. And yet it is possible; I have seen people find joy in long term suffering.

The verse tells us that we should rejoice in everything because it is God's will *for us*. Knowing that God has brought us this particular suffering for a good purpose comforts us.

We can also find purpose and joy in our suffering when we understand that our lives become significant when they signify something greater than ourselves. To signify means *to point to*. Do you know the children's book, *The Tale of the Three Trees*, by Angela Elwell Hunt?¹⁸ In it three evergreen trees face different destinies, all for the glory of God. The first two trees have their own ambitions, but the third tree wants nothing other than to grow tall and point to God. But then it is cut down, sawed into beams and left in a pile. The tree is crushed. Now it can never point to God. But wait. The beams from this very tree are used to make the Cross of Christ. It turns out that this tree receives the desire of its heart, and in a way far better than it ever imagined. That is a lot like our lives.

Everything we do matters, because we represent the King to the world. Because of this our lives have significance no matter what our station, even if we are confined to a bed and unable to do much of anything at all. God will use us and our suffering to display his glory. When our lives point to Christ, we have meaning and purpose, and that gives us joy.

¹⁸ <https://www.o.ca.org/the-hub/study-guides/the-story-of-the-three-trees>

We don't know why things happen to us as they do. In fact, we *can't* know why, or we will never discover whether we really love the Lord or just his gifts. Remember Satan said to God, "Does Job fear God for nothing?...But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face" (Job 1:9,11). God took up Satan's challenge, but Job never knew the spiritual battle going on behind the scenes as he lost everything he cherished for apparently no reason. If he had known, his relationship with God would have become transactional, just as Satan had insinuated. If Job had known why God had stricken him, he would have been able to hang on until God blessed him again, knowing that was coming. But he didn't know. To reveal that his love for God was for *God* and not his gifts, he had to serve God for nothing. And so do we.

Our lives always turn out differently than we thought they would. And we all suffer in ways we had not anticipated. But as children of God we do not live in purposeless misery. We know that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). That word, "workmanship," comes from the Greek word "poeima," which means a work of art. God is making us into a thing of beauty that testifies to His beauty. Recognizing this mysterious but very real work of God in our lives gives us joy.

Wherever we are, that is right where God wants us. You may feel like you have been put on a shelf and left alone to suffer, and that your invisible little life means nothing. Don't you believe it. You don't yet know what God will do with your life. Whatever we do, let us do it to the glory of God. Jesus said not even a cup of water given in his name would fail to receive a reward.¹⁹ Remember that with the Lord, the little things *are* the big things.

When we understand that everything we do is an opportunity to glorify God by trusting him and being thankful for his wise ordering our lives for our good and the good of others, we can embrace what *is* and be happy in it.

And yet: suffering always attacks our hearts. Women are not fans of war imagery usually, but that's how scripture describes it. Our hearts are a battleground between fear and faith, doubt and hope, truth and lies. Fear is a big one. It affects all of us, and it is the enemy of joy. Joy can coexist with sadness and even anger (like when your teenager comes home way past curfew and you want to hug them and kill them at the same time), but not fear.

Fear is the Enemy of Joy

Psalms 16 begins: "Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge." I love how our Conference psalm begins with a plea for protection and ends with joy in the presence of the Lord. It's impossible to have joy when we are consumed by fear. God knows we are afraid. It's why we are told over and over again in scripture "Do not fear."

¹⁹ Matthew 10:42

God doesn't coddle us. He calls us to fight fear with faith. I used to feel scriptural commands not to fear as condemnation. I tend to be fearful and anxious, and I would feel guilty about it. Why can't I trust God more? But I have come to see the tone of scripture as less rebuke and more one of confidence and reassurance, as when a father tells his fearful child, "Don't worry. You are safe with me." When God says, "Do not fear," he's saying, "I've got this. I am with you and I will protect and care for you." I also remember that Jesus was never harsh with a woman. So let's read scriptural admonitions not to fear as the encouragement they are meant to provide.

What's hard for me and probably for you is knowing that sometimes God ordains some pretty difficult stuff to enter our lives. Acts 14:22 tells us: "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Suffering is painful, and we naturally fear it. Clearly God's promise of protection is for the long run, not necessarily in this life, at least not the kind of protection we crave: complete safety.

Instead God promises to sustain us through whatever he brings into our lives, and even if we die, we know that we will be with him. Paul told the Philippians: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know. I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (1:21-23). Can we honestly say that? Paul had been caught up to the third heaven, that is, the dwelling place of Christ. He had experienced what it meant to be with Christ and he said it was better *by far*. The more we can lay hold of these words, the less fearful we will be.

We are also tempted to worry. Worry is fear trying to gain control by imagining the worst and trying to figure out what we can do to prevent it. I am an expert at this. It doesn't help, of course. Corrie Ten Boom quipped: "Worry is like a rocking chair. It keeps you moving but doesn't get you anywhere."²⁰ Jesus asked, "which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?" (Luke 12:25). Looked at that way, it's pretty silly and pointless to worry. Philosopher Michel de Montaigne observed: "My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened."²¹ Worry only adds to our suffering.

A cousin of worry is to be haunted by the what-if's. I know I am. What if my worst nightmare comes true? What if the deepest longings of my heart are never answered? Will God be enough? Can I surrender everything to him, and say no matter what I will be happy in the Lord? I love the verse in Psalm 84:11: "No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly." If I am walking with the Lord and I don't have something I want, then it's not good for me, at least not right now.

²⁰ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/inspiring-quotes/40-powerful-quotes-from-corrie-ten-boom.html>

²¹ <http://quoteseed.com/quotes/michel-de-montaigne/michel-de-montaigne-my-life-has-been-full-of-terrible/>

Even stress often has its root in fear. What if I can't get it all done? What if we can't pay the bills? Health experts often tell us to reduce stress in our lives, but most of what stresses us we cannot control. Our problem often is not stress per se, but unbelief. When we actively put our trust in God, stress diminishes. We do what we can and let the rest go, trusting it to the Lord.

Instead of worrying, we need to turn our "what if's" of fear into "even ifs" of faith.

Habbakuk prophesied the coming Babylonian destruction of Israel. The absolute worst would happen, and he knew it. Yet he could write this:

Even if the fig trees have no blossoms,
and there are no grapes on the vines;
even if the olive crop fails,
and the fields lie empty and barren;
even if the flocks die in the fields,
and the cattle barns are empty,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD!
I will be joyful in the God who saves me!
(3:16-18)

Even if my worst happens, I will be joyful in God. Why? Because he knows what is best, he proved his love for me at the Cross, and he promises to deliver me safely to his heavenly kingdom. That's the place where all our longings will finally be fulfilled.

What About Depression?

I want to briefly mention Depression as a particular kind of suffering that is especially hard to overcome. Not that I am any expert in Depression, but I want to acknowledge that Depression is more than discouragement or grief. I believe it can have a physical component too. It seems that Depression often comes unexpectedly out of nowhere, and it also seems to lift unexpectedly.

Many great saints of history experienced Depression: Spurgeon, Calvin, and others, so if you are wearing "the lead cape of darkness" as a dear friend of mine calls it, know that you have company. I once asked a friend who was deeply depressed, do you think that you could still hope in God? She answered honestly: "I don't know."

We live in a world obsessed with experts that tell us "how to" do everything, including overcoming depression. This can add to our burdens when we can't do it. Christian writer Alan Noble wrote in a recent article titled simply "On Living,"²² that we are all "high functioning disorders." The world is disordered and so are our hearts. He goes on to say that "sometimes anxiety and depression are rational and moral responses to a fundamentally disordered

²² <https://medium.com/@thealannoble/on-living-3363ce5bb6ac>

environment.” While a medical approach does help some people, we should not lose sight of the fact that our deepest problems are not chemical imbalances in the brain, but the spiritual brokenness that is the lot of every person.

Noble writes: “You can and should pursue professional help, but just remember that there are limits...All the counseling and medication in the world cannot replace the existential decision to live and rely on God and your neighbor...which at root, is actually the choice to worship.” The medicalizing of depression and anxiety can make us think that everything is fixable, or ought to be. That’s not true. In this life, some things just aren’t going to be fixed. For the depressed person, persevering in faith is your mission to point to the worth of Christ. That makes your life significant: your life signifies the value of Christ as you keep trusting him in your darkness.

Noble also says, suicide is not an option. It’s just not. The same way married couples should never allow the D word to enter into their arguments, the S word is never an option for a Christian. I am not saying it is unforgivable, but if you love your family and friends, you must understand that your attempt at relief will add unspeakable suffering to their lives as they wonder what they could have done and why their love wasn’t enough. Satan will lie to you and say they would be better off without you. No, they won’t. They will never get over it. Don’t allow it as an possibility for even a second. Life is a gift from God; embrace it as good even in suffering. Suffering isn’t forever. That too is a lie from the pit.

If you are depressed, do you think you can keep hoping in God? My friend did. She got her life back. Did her suffering change? Nope. But *she* is changed. She says she knows Christ much more deeply now than she ever did before the events occurred that catapulted her into Depression. Joni Eareckson Tada wrote in her book, *When God Weeps*, “It’s worth anything to be his friend.” Fifty years into quadriplegia, she’s still saying so.²³

I would urge you not to isolate yourself, but to find at least one safe person to talk to, to read scripture and pray together. This is what the body of Christ is for, to help bear one another’s burdens. Don’t do this alone. Take care of your physical body. Seek out godly counsel. Do what you can in the strength God supplies. And above all, keep hoping in the Lord.

Always Remember: Jesus Understands

Our Savior suffers has compassion on us, because he suffered first. “Compassion” comes from the Latin “cum” (with) and “patior” (to suffer). Jesus suffers with us. He knows how we feel. He really, really knows. Hebrews 4:15-16 tells us: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” If no one else understands, Jesus does, and he is ready to help in time of need.

²³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reflections-on-50th-anniversary-of-my-diving-accident/>

I once was part of a meeting with a woman who was in ministry to women who had been sexually abused. She herself had been sexually abused as a child. She told us that she had a hard time for awhile believing that Jesus could know how she felt. After all, he hadn't been held down and molested while helpless to stop it. Until it dawned on her that Jesus was crucified naked. He didn't have that little white linen napkin covering that we see in all the paintings. He was utterly helpless, literally pinned, exposed, and at the mercy of wicked men.

Suddenly she saw: he did understand. It happened to him, too. Whatever our suffering, Jesus understands because he really did experience every kind of suffering that comes to human beings. Therefore he really is able to comfort us.

To conclude, I'd like to share

Three Ways God Makes Us Happy in our Suffering

Here are three reasons God makes us glad in suffering. You can find many more on your own, and I hope you will. The more you discover, the happier you will be in God!

1. God delays to give us greater joy: Almost all of our suffering requires us to wait for the Lord, sometimes a long, long time. Eleven of the psalms mention this: *Wait for the Lord*. Nine psalms give voice to our agony in waiting: *How Long, O Lord?*

Possibly my favorite story illustrating God's delay for our good is recounted in John Chapter 11. Martha is devastated by her brother Lazarus's death. When Jesus arrives, she almost accuses him, saying, "this wouldn't happened if you had been here." Jesus answers: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn 11:25-26). We don't know what she was thinking, but I can picture her feeling frustrated as she answers, yes, I know, one day we will all be resurrected. But my brother is dead *now*. Why didn't you come? Of course, Jesus then proceeds to raise Lazarus back to life. Can you imagine the joy and awe of that day?

They had sent word to Jesus days earlier that Lazarus was sick. The text says: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. **So**, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was" (John 11:5-6). Did you catch that? Jesus loved them so much that he stayed two days *longer*. He was clearly waiting for Lazarus to die. He caused them pain, on purpose.

Finally Jesus showed up when it was too late (or so they thought). When he asked them to roll the stone away from Lazarus's tomb, the ever-practical Martha protested (using KJV): "Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days" (John 11:39). He was so dead he stunk. Why bother? But Jesus responded: "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" (11:40) And did they ever see the glory of God. All because Jesus didn't come when they wanted him to.

When we are going through long periods where Jesus just doesn't come and he doesn't seem to answer our prayers, this is a good story to meditate on. It's precisely *because* he loves us that he often delays. He knows that waiting deepens our appreciation and joy, and he wants to give us the greatest joy possible. Our greatest joy is seeing the glory of God, and we most appreciate that glory when it is delayed.

I waited so many years for children. I thought maybe it wasn't God's will that I have children at all. I certainly didn't deserve them. God would have been perfectly just to deny that gift and I knew it. But years later, when Corey was born, I experienced such joy that I cannot even begin to express it. I couldn't believe it was actually happening. The same thing happened with Audrey's arrival. Everyone is thrilled by the birth of a child, but my joy was magnified because I had to wait so long. And this joy stayed with me. Do you think I minded those many nights without sleep caring for infants? Long days with crabby toddlers? Hours in the car carting older children from one place to another? (Well, maybe that.) I tell you, I did not. I treasured every moment, even the hard ones. God magnified my joy and gratitude by making me wait.

The story of Lazarus teaches us that God purposely brings us to a place of suffering, so that he may give us greater joy in the long run. Remember Jesus's words: if you believe, you will see the glory of God. John Piper defines the glory of God as "the going public of his infinite worth."²⁴ Isn't that why we marvel? We are privileged in those moments when God does show up, to see our invisible God's glory made visible, and we can't help but exult in him. You might say the glory of God is the "wow" factor in our lives. God's delay gives us greater joy. Why not be happy about that right now?

2. God makes us happy by conquering our sin through our suffering: At the Cross Jesus conquered death that we might live. This is the part we love to think about. At the same time, he made death a centerpiece of what it means to follow him. He said: If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mat. 16:24-25). That sounds heavy and a bit scary. If we want to follow Christ, we must take up a cross. The cross is of course an instrument of painful death, but for Jesus it was how he loved his people. He also told us, "If you love me you will do what I command" (John 14:15), and he commands us to die to our sinful selves and live wholly for him.

Puritan Thomas Case wrote this:

Sin brought affliction into the world, and God makes affliction carry sin out of the world....God has never intended more good for his children than when he deals most severely with them...If the children of God in affliction would sit down and consider the fruit and advantage that God would bring out of their sorrows, this would keep them from undue despondency and dejection of spirit. Do not look at the suffering, but at the invisible fruit. This holds up the head, keeps

²⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-gods-glory>

the heart, and makes the soul patient. It glories in tribulation, knowing that tribulation works patience, experience, and hope.²⁵

Can you believe that God never intends more good for you than when he deals most severely with you?

Suffering with faith in God grows the fruit of the Spirit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. We have a small apple orchard. The apples grow imperceptibly from spring to fall. We can't see them growing, but one day suddenly it seems that the trees are loaded with fruit. Our sanctification is like that: slower than we want and mostly undetectable, but one day we recognize that the fruit of the Spirit *has* grown in us. We are not yet we hope to be, but we are not what we were. This is how God makes us happy by conquering our sin through suffering.

3. God makes us happy by using our suffering to comfort others: Our suffering prepares us to be able to comfort others. We know what is like to feel hopeless. To battle doubt. To just hurt deeply. Paul David Tripp puts it this way in his wonderful book *Suffering*: "Your suffering has given you a toolbox of gospel skills that make you ready and equipped to answer God's call to be an agent of comfort in the lives of fellow sufferers."²⁶ Can you believe that? It's true.

If we didn't suffer, we would become complacent with our shallow little lives. We would be tempted to care for only our own pleasures and concerns, and we would be immune to the sufferings of others. Paul rejoices in this: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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 by God" (2Cor1:3-4). Our suffering teaches us to empathize with fellow sufferers, and gives us knowledge and credible experience to be able to comfort others, that is, to impart strength to them, comforting them with the comfort we ourselves received from the Lord.

This can play out in so many ways. I have been the recipient of comfort from friends who have pointed me to the Lord and reminded me to trust in him, who have shared scripture with me, who have prayed for me, who have written me notes, met with me, invited me in, and encouraged me in a thousand ways.

These things don't come naturally to me. I have learned so much from my sisters in the Lord, and often copied them, doing for others what they have done for me. Paul wrote: "imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1Cor11:1). When you find a good example, copy it!

²⁵Richard Rushing, ed. (2009). *Voices of the Past*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust. (327)

²⁶ Paul David Tripp. (2018). *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway. (201)

A few years ago, I was in a bad place emotionally. I won't go into the details but I was depressed and saw no hope of improvement of what was discouraging me. It happened to be 2016, when Joni paid us a visit. She spoke of her depression after being paralyzed: "This is my life. How will I bear it?" I realized I felt exactly that way about my life at that time.

She told how, because of her pain and difficulty sleeping, she still feels grumpy every morning, but she asks God to give her a smile for those who come in to help her, and he always does.

Joni explained that our souls are not so fragile as we imagine, and God hammers us throughout our lives. She showed us some earrings she wears that have been mangled, maybe by the wheels of her chair? I forget. But she showed them to us, pointing out that now that they are mangled, they catch more light than when they were smooth. Our mangled lives, if we keep hoping in the Lord, can catch his light and be a comfort and encouragement to others in their brokenness. Joni comforted me at that time in my life.

I've shared here how I have been comforted, but nothing makes me happier than being on the other side. To know that something I said or did helped someone else to keep hoping in the Lord is one of the happiest feelings in the world. The best preparation for that is our own suffering. And that is how God makes us happy by using our suffering to comfort others.

Conclusion

If suffering is "having what we don't want, and not having what we do want," let us remind ourselves that what we most want and need is to know the Lord and to see his glory. In *Champagne for the Soul*, Mike Mason observes, "Unhappiness is not primarily a product of pain and hardship, but of resisting the will of God."²⁷ When we stop resisting and instead embrace God's will as for our good, that alone eases suffering. Whatever our suffering now, it won't have the last word. Jesus will. And that is something to be happy about.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, our great high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, we come to you to receive mercy and grace to help in time of need. Thank you for your promise that you will never, ever, leave us or forsake us.

Grant us the will and the ability to keep trusting in you no matter what our suffering, because the path through suffering leads us to a place of joy unspeakable and full of glory.

In your name I ask, Amen.

²⁷Mike Mason. (2007). *Champagne for the Soul: Rediscovering God's Gift of Joy*. Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing. (34)

