

Text: *"Where is God in all the suffering?"* by Amy Orr Ewing.

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These notes can be found at: <https://davidbissette.com/>

## Session 1: Setting the Stage

### Goals of this study

- Survey the basics of what the Bible says about suffering
- Consider how the possibility of suffering was inherent in giving free will to humankind
- Gain an understanding of the nature of suffering and how God uses it
- Develop hope for an ultimate positive outcome from suffering
- Provide practical steps you can take to lessen your pain during suffering and find moments of joy even during very tough times.

A word of housekeeping—about time. During the pandemic many of us work on Zoom. In order prevent additional “Zoom tedium” we are going to try to keep these sessions to an hour, though we may go over a few minutes when it seems unavoidable. In light of this, though comments and questions are welcome, I ask you to keep them relatively focused. Also, after each session I will stay around for a few minutes for any further comments and discussion that you desire. If we do have to move a little rapidly through some material, hopefully these notes will give you a chance to reflect on things more thoughtfully at your leisure.

## Helpful hint #1: Balancing thoughts and feelings

Human suffering is one of the biggest mysteries of life. We live our lives as a daily reflection our beliefs about suffering as well as our own experiences of it. Though we talk about God as loving and sovereign, suffering challenges our beliefs—and it's scary. Suffering is an emotionally laden topic for pretty much everyone.

So, as we go through the next five weeks I'm going to ask you to pay attention to yourself and your reactions. If you suddenly become angry or sad, know that this is a natural reaction and don't panic. Acknowledge it to yourself—and to us here if you desire. On the off chance that you should feel a bit overwhelmed it's ok to detach temporarily from strong feelings and simply notice them as they come and go, like leaves floating by on a stream. Feelings are important, of course, but it's also important not to be awash in them, and they don't necessarily reflect reality. Remember that life is full of hope, and that is where we're heading.

On the other hand, don't overly embrace cognition by itself either. Neither feeling nor cognition is an adequate guide in life. In simplistic terms, we have our thoughts in our heads, and our feelings in our bodies. When life is painful we tend to evacuate our bodies and move up into our heads to avoid pain. That's certainly understandable, and helpful in handling emergencies. But it's not a good idea to stay that way—we lose both joy and intuition (our "gut") when we do that—and end up being the person described as "running around unsupervised in their head". Our thoughts lose their stability and become erratic when we are not grounded in our bodies. Also, others do not experience us as fully "present" to them.

Balance is needed, of course. While feelings do add life and intuition, thoughts can add clarity and direction. But relying on either one alone creates instability. And when thoughts and emotions align with one another, you are more likely to have found wisdom—which is needed in the face of suffering.

By the way, at any point in your life, whether now or at a later time, if you become overwhelmed with any type of emotion or concern, Christian and the other clergy are available to meet with you. Christian specifically asked me to tell you this. And if you have a preference for the gender of the person that you speak with, that will certainly be understood and honored.

## Helpful hint #2: "Truth is a two-sided coin"

You're going to hear a lot about two-sided coins in this study. That's because life itself is a like a two-sided coin, as is much theological truth. John Wesley often talked about embracing opposite statements in the Bible to find the full truth. Our need is often to learn which side of a truth to apply in a situation (which again is wisdom).

We all actually already do this. Think about which of these two things is true: "Birds of a feather flock together" and "Opposites attract". But like the Bible, we often don't talk about both sides of the coin at once, and at any moment we may talk about one side like the other doesn't exist. (There is one interesting exception to this in the Bible—Proverbs 26:4-5—where two opposite instructions are given in consecutive verses.) Understanding this principle alone can make your Bible reading much less stressful.

With life, one side of the coin is about joy while the other is about obstacles and difficulties. Each week we will start out on a positive note, looking at a passage of scripture expressing hope and joy, before turning to life's more difficult aspects.

## The “joy of life” side of the coin



Romans 8:18-19 NRSV

*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.*

Romans 5:1-2 NRSV

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

These passages point toward a later time in history when our revelation as children of God will be revealed as glorious. There is lots to look forward to, beyond the joy that is promised to us now. It's an assured outcome.

So, the best is yet to come—a great topic for meditation when times are tough. *The hope of glory, and the glory of hope.*

## The “life is difficult” side of the coin



## The Great Dilemma

The great dilemma for God had to do with whether or not to create humankind if significant suffering for both God and us might be the result. There are three main factors involved in answering these questions.

### • **First: It was God's plan to be our parent of sorts**

- This can be a confusing topic at times. The Bible presents God in the roles of both king and father at different times, and the two roles are distinctive (another two-sided coin).
- Also, in passing let me note the obvious, that both of these terms are in the masculine gender. It seems that God often had to limit self-revelation to concepts that people of the time would understand and be able to accept. The Bible has no language for a being without a specific gender during a culture that was almost completely patriarchal. My belief is that even our current views of God continue to

be primitive and deficient compared to what God is like. As we get to know God more and more our deepest desires and needs will be met.

Psalms 47:6-7

Sing praises to God, sing praises!

***Sing praises to our King***, sing praises!

***For God is the King of all the earth;***

sing praises with a psalm!

Isaiah 43: 5-7

Do not be afraid, for I am with you;

I will bring your children from the east  
and gather you from the west.

I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'

and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'

***Bring my sons from afar***

***and my daughters from the ends of the earth—***

everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory,

whom I formed and made."

2 Corinthians 6:16,18

"I will live in them and walk among them,

and I will be their God,

***and they shall be my people...***

***and I will be your father,***

***and you shall be my sons and daughters,***

says the Lord Almighty."

Note: The middle passage above mentions that we were created for God's glory. God's glory is a frequent topic in scripture, particularly the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), and something that is apparently very important to God from the way God talks about it.

If we focused on our own glory as much as God seems to focus on God's glory in the Bible, we'd be in serious danger of being labeled a narcissist. Who wants to entrust themselves to a narcissist?

This is an important topic for suffering, but too big to get into very much here. Suffice it to say that ***further revelation*** (and this is key) in the New Testament talks more about God's humility, the other side of the coin. (Jesus actually washes his disciples' feet.) For me, both sides—God's power to save and God's humility to care—are necessary to feel "safe" during suffering. Unfortunately, there's lots of unhelpful, rather tone deaf material about God's glory on the internet, but check:

- <https://cct.biola.edu/humility-god-the-imitation-of-christ/>
- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-glory-gods-only-goal/>

Our author says that our thoughts on suffering generally assume that people have inherent and sacred value by virtue of being human beings, and that the role of love is

central to our discussion. Suffering can certainly make one feel unloved and add to the pain of suffering. This is part of the puzzle. Let's talk about that.

*Discussion:*

- What do you imagine that God, as our parent, feels about us?
  - How do you, or other parents, feel about their children?
  - How do you show it to others? Pictures on Facebook, among other ways?
  - What do you imagine that God feels about our suffering?
- **Second: On our own we tend to sabotage our lives (including our relationship with God) as well as our world and those in it.**

Genesis 3:6-7 When the serpent provided Eve with “misinformation” to create doubt about God’s motives and encourage her to disobey God...

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 23:37

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Matthew 11:21

“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.”

- *Discussion:* In what ways do you see humanity sabotaging ourselves and others?

- **Third: All of this sabotaging is the result of free will, which we need if we are going to love God (or each other for that matter).**

## What is God to do? Creation or not?

*Discussion*

- If you were God, knowing all of this, would you still create humankind? Why?
- If you said yes, with both life on earth and eternity in mind, what would you actually do about our tendency to sabotage our own and others well-being?
- What do you do or see other parents actually do for their children to help them past their behaviors that are clearly a problem?
- All of this by no means clears up everything, but it is a start.

On **God's** side, creating humankind was a **huge** event. And the price that God would eventually pay for it to be successful was staggering.

- Actually, God paid a *daily* price after creation way before Jesus died on the cross, and still does.

On **our** side, one of the really hard issues involved in all of this is the scale of suffering that God allows. How much is just **too** much? Coming to terms with that is **way** more than an intellectual challenge.

## Homework

1. Read chapters 1-3: Asking why?, Anger, and Grief
2. Ponder:
  - What responsibilities might God-as-parent feel toward us? What about when we do wrong?
  - What about God acting as king? Would that be any different?
  - Don't expect to easily reconcile your thoughts with the suffering you see around yourself. We're just getting started.

# Session 2: God and Tragedy

The “joy of life” side  
of the coin



Psalm 8:3-9 - A Psalm of David.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.  
O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Songs of praise were often part of David’s life. The Psalms are a great place to spend some time...almost all emotions are expressed there.

The “life is difficult” side  
of the coin



## Reading #1: Orr-Ewing, chap. 1-3

- In Chapter 1 our author places significant emphasis on our being made in the image of God. How is this seem to be true to you? Does this give you a sense of your own value? Does this relate to suffering for you?
- Chapter 2’s topic is anger.
  - Psalm 13:1-2 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?
  - Psalm 10:1-2 Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

- Psalm 35:17 How long, Lord, will you look on?
- Psalm 44:24 Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself!
- Lam 5:20 Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?
- Habakkuk 1:1-4 How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore, the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.
- Question: How comfortable are you with anger in general—even being around it? How about having anger towards God?
- Chapter 3 is about grief.
  - Elisabeth Kübler-Ross - denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and after all that—grief. These are the five stages that we may actually experience *before* grief. One person may not experience all of them, and the order may vary.
  - How have you experienced grief in the past? What has the effect of grief on your spiritual life? Were any of her comments particularly helpful to you?

## Reading #2: Why Does God Allow Tragedy and Suffering?

Did some parts of this article appeal to you more than others? What did you like about them?

### **The first point of light: God is not the creator of evil and suffering.**

- Some people think of suffering as a necessary tool God uses to carry out God’s “grand plan”. Others see suffering as originally unnecessary for God’s plan, but once evil entered the world suffering became unavoidable, and God worked with it toward good ends. What is your view?
- God’s sovereignty doesn’t mean that God is the author of everything that happens. There is something that is called God’s permissive will—those things that God does not make to happen, and may even violently oppose—but are being permitted for the time being. It is believed by many that there is some process that God must allow to be played out before evil and suffering is stopped—that all tragedy and suffering is not the “will of God”. Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?
- Note: There is such a thing as fair and just punishment as a consequence for wrongdoing, perhaps to discourage it, but that’s not what we’re talking about here.

### **The second point of light: Though suffering isn't good, God can use it to accomplish good.**

- Romans 8:28 - We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.



- Does this include things in God's permissive will?
- This verse doesn't include a time line. Honestly speaking, what are your thoughts about God's timing?

### **The third point of light: The day is coming when suffering will cease and God will judge evil.**

- Suffering will cease...later  
The Garden of Eden started off great...no suffering and lots to eat! :)  
Then came the period of suffering that we are in now. Times can be pretty tough.  
Then will come a final, eternal time of well-being and joy.
- God will judge evil  
Romans 2: 4-8 - "Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are **storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath**, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury."  
  
This judgment doesn't happen right away. Second Peter 3:9 - "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."
- Though these verses don't directly address injustice, feeling like others "get away with it" (like the prophet Habakkuk did) can create a deep desire for perpetrators to face consequences. Powerlessness in the face of injustice is significant suffering and a very common experience. Our country, like most, has a long history of it. Are these verses a comfort to you or scary, or both?

### **The fourth point of light: Our suffering will pale in comparison to the good things God has in store for his followers.**

- 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, the 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,  
  
"See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

**Finally, the fifth point of light: We decide whether to turn bitter or turn to God for peace and courage.**

- Hopelessness eventually leads to bitterness
  - Hebrews 12:15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;
  - Ephesians 4:31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.
  - Acts 8:23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."
- How do you get out of bitterness?
  - If hopelessness got you there, maybe hope can get you out...that talking with others to restore your faith, and allowing yourself to get some TLC from those who care.

Thought for the day: No matter how deep the pit, God is deeper still. Corrie ten Boom

People who have been at some of the **very** worst places in life say that God came through for them. Corrie ten Boom is a good example (Google her), and the subject of this week's extra reading homework is another. There are innumerable of people of faith who have said the same thing...a "cloud of witnesses". (Hebrews 11)

## Homework

1. Read chapters 4-6
2. Read the article "What if love is the real choice?"

# Quotes from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

“Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms you would never see the true beauty of their carvings.”

“People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.”

“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.”

“There is within each one of us a potential for goodness beyond our imagining; for giving which seeks no reward; for listening without judgment; for loving unconditionally.”

“We think sometimes we're only drawn to the good, but we're actually drawn to the authentic. We like people who are real more than those who hide their true selves under layers of artificial niceties.”

“I've told my children that when I die, to release balloons in the sky to celebrate that I graduated. For me, death is a graduation.”

“Today, in our “shut up, get over it, and move on” mentality, our society misses so much, it's no wonder we are a generation that longs to tell our stories.”

“The more you learn, the harder the lessons get.”

“When someone is telling you their story over and over, they are trying to figure something out.”

“We often tend to ignore how much of a child is still in all of us.”

“I think it is cruel to expect the constant presence of any one family member (to tend to the ill). Just as we have to breathe in and breathe out, people have to “recharge their batteries” outside the sickroom at times, live a normal life from time to time; we cannot function efficiently in the constant awareness of illness.”

“And death has a cruel way of giving regrets more attention than they deserve.”

# Session 3: Though suffering isn't good, God can use it to accomplish good.

The “joy of life” side  
of the coin



*Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.* Words by Walter Chalmers Smith (1824-1908) a Scottish Free Church minister who served congregations in London, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Hymnologist Albert Bailey says composing poetry was for Smith "the retreat of his nature from the burden of his labors."

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=spE-BE23qxA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spE-BE23qxA)

Homework: Send me the names of hymns that bring you joy, and I will compile them as a handout for our last session together. Also, separately include activities that cheer you up... such as writing poetry, cooking a favorite dish, watching a certain movie. I'll add some too.

The “life is difficult” side  
of the coin



Chapter 4: Sickness - “According to the Bible our general human experience of disease is unaffected by our specific moral behaviour and even by our belief system.”

- Our author ultimately does not answer the “why” of physical pain and sickness in terms of God’s intentions for allowing it. She simply says that we are not alone in it, and that God has experienced it also. Do you agree?
- I have been tempted to say that the part of suffering that God limits and we cannot prevent despite our good and important efforts—even with its intensity—must be very important during this present age, despite it not bringing pleasure to God or being a part of God’s plan for either Eden or eternity, simply because God has allowed so much of it. What are your thoughts?

Chapter 5: Mental Illness

- In all sorts of ways emotional and behavioral problems have to do with loss of self control, while people around you will typically be telling you to get control of yourself. Whether it’s depression, addiction, anxiety, or mania—psychological problems are tough. Some of it is genetic, and some is from traumatic experiences.

- *What do you need from God and others when mental illness strikes you or someone you love?*

## Chapter 6: Violence

- As our author said in this chapter, when one experiences significant, deliberate violence they typically have come face to face with evil. And that brings up two additional topics beyond the big one of evil: justice and forgiveness. Both evil and forgiveness are huge topics and easily deserve significant time to discuss, so we're not going to have time to discuss them here.
- However, given what the Bible has to say about God and justice, what are your expectations from God about justice? How do you pray during times of injustice?

## How God uses suffering to accomplish good

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

### **Suffering:**

#### **1. Gets our attention**

- Causes us to focus on what's important, including our relationship with God
  - C. S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*, writes, "We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

#### **2. Promotes growth**

- Causes us to mature
  - James 1:2-4 "Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."
- Suffering will give us gifts if we work with it
  - Will take us "places" we would have never gone otherwise, and meet people and have experiences we would have never had

#### **3. Causes us to clean up our lives—and keep them clean**

- Corrects behaviors—God's discipline
  - Ps 119:67 "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word."
  - Hebrews 12:7 "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?"

- Maintain humility - Paul's thorn in flesh
  - II Corinthians 12:7-9 "Because of the extraordinary greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'"

#### **4. Gives us an opportunity to serve others**

- Suffer so that others don't have to
- Participating in the sufferings of Jesus, and for the Gospel
  - 1 Peter 4:12-13 "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."
  - Romans 8: 17-18 "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heir of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

#### **5. Shows the glory of God to encourage our belief and others'**

- Miracles happen like the blind man who was healed to show the glory of God
  - John 9:1-3 "As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'"
- Also, as others observe us during times of illness, whether we're healed or maintain our character in the midst of suffering, they see our faith, our hope, and our love and often wished they had as much for themselves.

Ultimately there is "holy mystery" around suffering we will never understand

- There are likely multiple purposes and reasons at any one time
- As the saying goes, "I don't know what my future holds, but I know Who holds my future." This goes back to our very first premise...that God is essentially our parent.

# Homework

1. Read chapters 7-Conclusion
2. Read AA Slogans
3. View “For your mirror” and use it if you wish
4. Send me the names of hymns that bring you joy, and I will compile them as a handout for our last session together. Also, separately include activities that cheer you up...such as writing poetry, cooking a favorite dish (tell us which one), or watching a certain movie. They will be included.

# “Today I have more solutions than problems.”

## A few slogans, courtesy of AA

(All slogans do not fit all situations; use when helpful.)

1. This, too, shall pass.
2. Expect miracles.
3. I can't, God can, I think I'll let God
4. We are only as sick as our secrets.
5. Sponsors (mentors): have one use one be one.
6. More will be revealed.
7. You will be amazed.
8. Before you say I can't, say I'll try.
9. Don't quit before the miracle happens.
10. God is never late. It takes time.
11. You are not alone.
12. Use the 24-hour plan.
13. Make use of the telephone therapy.
14. Look for the similarities rather than differences.
15. When all else fails, follow directions.
16. Share your pain.
17. Let go of old ideas.
18. Try to replace guilt with gratitude.
19. Man's extremity is God's opportunity.
20. What if.....
21. Yeah but.....
22. If only.....
23. Easy does it, but DO it.
24. Bring the body and the mind will follow.
25. Fear is the darkroom where negatives are developed.
26. I want what I want when I want it.
27. Faith is spelled a-c-t-i-o-n.
28. Formula for failure: try to please everyone.
29. Willpower=our willingness to use a Higher Power.
30. G.O.D.=Good Orderly Direction.
31. You received without cost, now give without charge.
32. Humility is our acceptance of ourselves.
33. Trying to pray is praying.
34. We're responsible for the effort not the outcome.
35. Serenity is not freedom from the storm but peace amid the storm.
36. It isn't the load that weighs us down--it's the way we carry it.
37. If faith without works is dead; then willingness without action is fantasy.
38. The task ahead of us is never as great as the Power behind us.
39. The results are in God's hands.
40. We are not human beings having spiritual experiences; we are spiritual beings having human experiences.
41. Remember nothing is going to happen today that you and God can't handle.
42. Be careful what you pray for; you're liable to get it.
43. The will of God will never take you where the grace of God will not protect you.
44. Slogans are wisdom written in shorthand.
45. If you find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere.
46. Don't compare---identify.
47. Intolerance= Contempt, prior to investigation.
48. A coincidence is a miracle in which God chooses to remain anonymous.
49. Give time time.
50. I can do something for 24 hours that would appall me if I had to keep it up for a LIFETIME.
51. Pain is the touchstone of spiritual growth.
52. The road to resentment is paved with expectation.
53. Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving.
54. Courage is faith that has said its prayers.
55. Try to be grateful and resentful at the same time, you can't serve two masters.
56. Write a gratitude list
57. We have a choice.
58. You don't have to wait till the basement to get off the down elevator.
59. Don't let unpleasant people rent space in your head.
60. It gets better.
61. Sorrow shared is halved; joy shared is doubled.
62. I don't always know what God's will is for me, but I always know what it's not.
63. Today I have more solutions than problems.
64. If God is your co-pilot, switch seats.
65. Don't go in your head alone. It's a dangerous neighborhood.
66. God grant me patience. Right now.
67. Don't try to clear away the wreckage of the future.
68. When the student is ready, the teacher appears.





*For your mirror*

Write or type something you want to remember and place it where you'll see it.



# Session 4: Our response to suffering is important

The last coin



From our book...

## Chapter 7 - Natural Disasters

When it comes to Christian theology, the impact of the wrongdoing of humankind on nature is not clear. Natural disasters plainly have no immediate connection with the behavior of any individual or group of individuals. What natural disasters certainly do, though, is through great pain remind us of the uncertainties of life. God does not see fit to answer all our questions at this time.

Comments: *Have you ever had to trust someone's motives when their actions seem to contradict them?* (My tinker toy example)

## Chapter 8 - Systemic Suffering

Our author quotes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "Unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty". This is suffering clearly created by humans. I'm not going to ask a question of you here...we have already discussed undeserved suffering, and our church seems to have a start in understanding the need to oppose systemic suffering.

## Chapter 9 - The Suffering Servant

Jesus suffered. A lot. And it was for us—in the midst of not having all the information about his suffering. In the garden the night before he was crucified he asked that he might avoid the upcoming crucifixion *if* possible. Apparently there were things about God's plans that Jesus did not know at that point. Only God knew if the cup could pass from him. And, of course, the answer was "No."

The next day on the cross he uttered the famous quote from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Interesting that this is the *same* question we ask when suffering, and it speaks to the humanity of Jesus. That Psalm describes horrible taunting and suffering, but eventually ends on a triumphant note—the same note that will someday be true in our lives if we entrust them to God. How much Jesus was actually feeling abandoned by God, I don't know. But David, who wrote it, was for sure, and that verse *is* part of the overall psalm that Jesus referred to. In any case, on the cross Jesus was not experiencing the promised joy, and he made it through. Perhaps, though we are not experiencing our promised joy yet either, we can make it through also.

PHILLIPS New Testament — Hebrews 12:2

“Surrounded then as we are by these serried ranks (rows) of witnesses, let us strip off everything that hinders us, as well as the sin which dogs our feet, and let us run the race that we have to run with patience, our eyes fixed on Jesus the source and the goal of our faith. For he himself endured a cross and thought nothing of its shame because of the joy he knew would follow his suffering; and he is now seated at the right hand of God’s throne. *Think constantly of him enduring all that sinful men could say against him and you will not lose your purpose or your courage.*”

Comments: *What brings you courage?*

## Managing suffering skillfully

“Manage” suffering skillfully? Isn’t that a silly idea? Not really. At first we certainly don’t know how to “manage” suffering skillfully, but that’s something we can learn. At least some. :)

We’re going to look at...

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| Today:     | 1) Feeding your faith   |
| Next week: | 2) Focusing on fellowship and<br>3) Practicing good self-care and care for others |

### • **Feeding your faith**

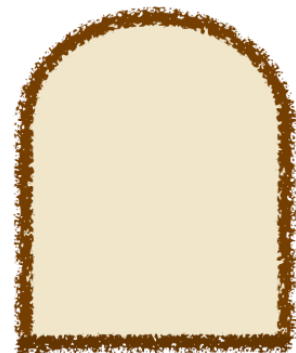
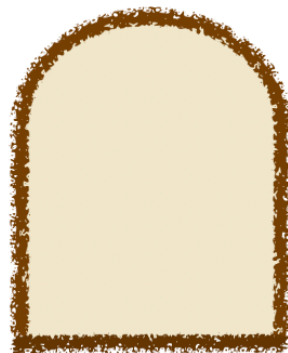
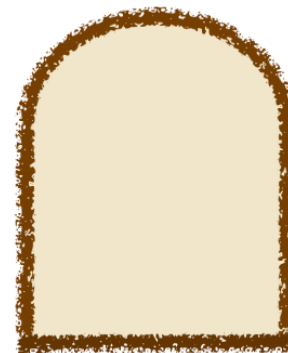
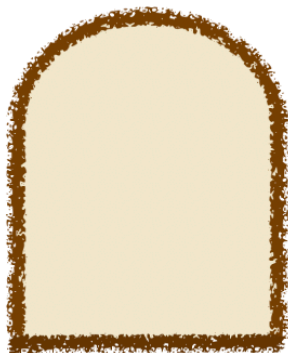
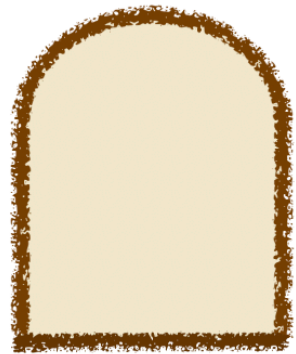
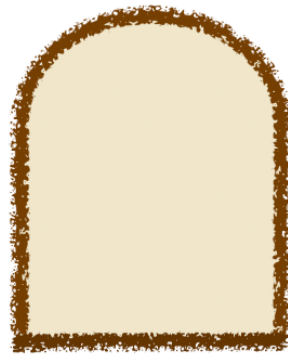
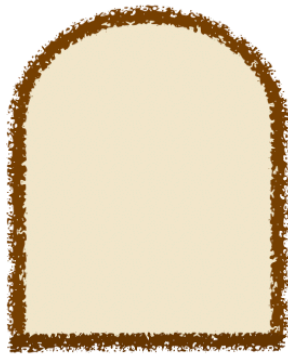
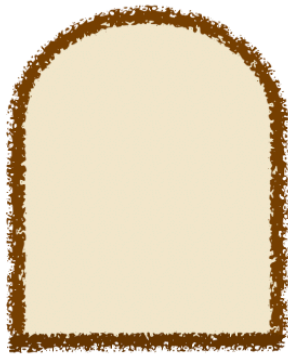
- Study (not just read) your Bible, and check out some good, contemporary authors. Do this before any new suffering!
  - John 6:63 “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”
- Note the “three omni’s” in the Bible—God’s omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. Also note God’s “omni-loving” and “omni-attentive” character and especially read the stories of the people in the Bible whose prayers God answered. Google “examples answered prayer bible”
- Use verses from scripture and other affirmations to remind you of life-giving beliefs (see AA slogans for a few possibilities). Put a couple where you will see them until they become an automatic part of your thinking.
- When your faith is lacking, spend time with those whose faith is stronger.
- Learn the serenity prayer...it will help you to keep from obsessing. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” It can sound trite until you are in a situation when you simply do not know what to do, whether to keep working to changing a situation, or just stop and accept it as it is.
- Practice prayer—a *conversation* with God. ACTS = adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Be honest with God about your complaints and your feelings.

- Utilize the Psalms
  - Pray the psalms—the full range of human emotion is there
  - There is a long history of lament in scripture—make your own wailing wall of losses and unfulfilled yearnings (really significant matters of the heart). See handout.
  - To find peace about a particularly difficult experience you may have to go to God and ask God to “speak” personally to you about it. You need to feel heard and understood by God and to experience God’s presence. It’s a relationship. You may not get an answer, but you might.
  - Memorialize losses in other ways: plant a tree or a garden, paint or buy a painting that speaks to you about a loss or write a poem and frame it. Sometimes it is best utilize something lasting and visible so that you can concretely express the lasting impact of the person or loss.
- Develop an outlook on life in which you accept periodic random suffering as a part of life that we all experience—though very unevenly at times. Don’t see yourself as singled out by God for something “bad”. Avoid bitterness and watch out for resentment and self pity. They are killers and will ruin any peace of mind you might have.
- Develop patience and a long view of life. God has given us many promises...many of which are being fulfilled *gradually*. In some ways we are in a transition time between now and eternity. The issues of timing and waiting are difficult ones.

## Homework

1. Read James 1 and Romans 8
2. Make a wailing wall? Only put things on it that really get to you
3. Email a list of favorite hymns and activities that improve your mood when you’re in a tough spot. Don’t let your classmates down! Perhaps you could do it in the next couple of days?

# My Wailing Wall



# Session 5: Our response to suffering, continued

## Focusing on fellowship

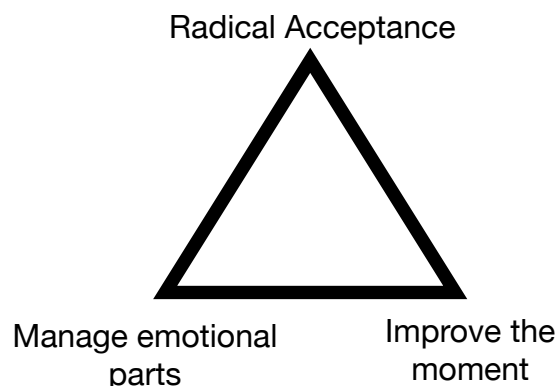
- One of the first things that happens when tragedy strikes is that we feel alone in our pain and separated from others. We fear that we have failed in some way and that our suffering will be too much for others. One of the worst things you can do when suffering is keep it inside yourself. Do NOT isolate - be part of a community. Circle the wagons for support.
- Learn how to talk to others about your life and your suffering. It's a skill. Share something positive, followed by what you are concerned about if you worry about feeling exposed.
- Get a therapist, mentor and/or a "journey pal". A mentor is someone who has already been through a lot. If addiction is a problem, join a fellowship that addresses the problem. Go to AA if needed, or AlAnon. (Al Anon is for the family members of alcoholics.) Find a good Sunday School class or a church-sponsored or community-sponsored support group where honesty is valued and people aren't easily shaken.
  - If you can, join groups of people who have experiences like your own. Don't attempt to unpack huge feelings without the support of others to help you with them. You may need multiple places to share. Be gentle with yourself.
  - It may take some work to find a good group where there is both a positive focus and a compassionate listening ear, as well as some gentle, practical help in recovery from whatever is happening.
  - Those who have chronic pain sometimes have "pain pals"—people who, like themselves, are going through pain. When they are in pain and medication is not helping, they call one another and talk until the pain passes. It doesn't matter what they talk about...not being alone and being distracted helps until the pain gets better for the moment, at least.
- Let others feel important and useful to you. Don't be above receiving—being able to receive love is an important skill. At the same time, don't lump all of your valid needs on one person...spread yourself around to a network of friends. You will feel better about yourself. Assisting with certain tasks will be natural for some people, while other tasks will stress them. Find out who likes what. Some people will grocery shop, while others will take you to the doctor.
- Learn how to give as an adult but receive as a child. Take in the good that comes your way into your inner, childlike self and take time to celebrate it. To refuse help is to tell someone they are of no use to you, and to deny a compliment is to take the gift they just gave you and discard it in front of them. Tell others that they made your day...and maybe they will give you more in the future. Others want to feel like they can help.

# Practicing good self care and care for others

## • The basics

- Look after your body (exercise, good food) and your mind, and get professional help in areas where you need it. Don't worry about being weak and needing help...we're all weak and need help. Those who do help us can only help us so much anyhow, so find whatever help you can. We must admit our need for others, including professionals.
- Spend some time on the internet looking for self-care ideas and how to select a good professional in your area of concern.
- Beware of "The four deadly 'D's' of depression" - Feeling *defective, defeated, deserted, and deprived*. When you're down, attempt to identify those beliefs and counter them.
  - If you are depressed and all you can do is make a cup of tea, then make a cup of tea. There will always a next step that you *are* able to take when you feel immobilized. Find it. Then find the next step.
- Give to others as you are able
  - Work to reduce others' suffering whenever you can
  - Pray for others
- Be careful about guilt. Accepting responsibility for your actions is important, but don't take on more guilt than is true or assume that every difficult experience is the result of some wrongdoing on your part. Even if you have done something wrong, you are not likely to have done something uniquely wrong more than all of us do at one time or another, and there may be extenuating circumstances that partly account for your behavior.
- Similar to guilt, be wary of shame—the feeling that you don't measure up. Finding out that reasonable others identify with you will reduce shame. When you share with others, look for their reciprocal response of sharing something vulnerable—it's a sign of a healthy person and can make a world of difference to you.
- If your behavior harmed someone, consider how an amends might be made. The topic of amends is a bit complicated, but can be discussed with someone familiar with it. People who are experienced with 12-step programs will have ideas about what to do and what not to do.

## • The emotional triad



## - Radical acceptance

- Radical acceptance is one way that we can reduce our suffering while also increasing our sense of personal freedom.
- It is a willingness to accept right now things as they are right now. It includes an acceptance of the difficulty associated with your circumstances and a focus on the actions needed to move forward.
- Do not increase your suffering by judging the fairness of the situation or attaching excess meaning to it. Don't give in to fantasy and "live in the wreckage of your future". Take things one day at a time.
- It is NOT approving of what is happening, but rather accepting that there is no way to make reality go away, even if you do not like it.
- *Ask what, not why.* Not "Why is this happening to me?", but "This is my reality so far...**what** do I need to do next?"
- Cultivate positive curiosity—it's powerful.
  - "I wonder what this situation is going to bring me as I work with it?"
  - "Where might I go? Whom might I meet? What might I notice or learn?"
  - Positive curiosity can be really motivating.
  - Tell yourself: "It might not be as bad as I imagine."
- There is a lot involved with this that we cannot take into account here—like processing your emotions with others (and God), receiving comfort, and doing what you can to soothe yourself. It also assumes that you have already done what you can do to change the situation.
- Radical acceptance means that you are not fighting reality or over-interpreting it.

## - Manage emotional parts

- Think of yourself as a car with you as the driver and your upset feelings as passengers.
- The driver part of you (the "core you") will typically be relatively grounded in your thoughts and feelings, while your passengers are less so. Your stronger feelings may attempt to merge with you and take over the wheel. When this happens, and it may already have happened for years with some feelings, kindly and gently ask those feelings to step back and tell you about their concerns. Keep doing this until you feel like you are your grounded self.
- Respect your feelings—don't hate them. It can feel very much like you are having an internal conversation.
- Work with them. They are a part of you, but don't let them hijack you. If they seem large, say to yourself, "Wow, I'm having a lot of BIG feelings!" Verbalize them to someone else.



- Even violent feelings can mean well, though their ideas about how to solve problems probably will not actually bring about the results that they imagine. Recognize the good you can find in their reasoning, and express your agreement. But reason with them, and offer reassurance that you understand their perspective and your appreciation of their passion and concern. They may be young and afraid, and it may take time. Also, different feelings/parts may need to be dealt with one at a time. You could have several passengers to contend with. They can get complicated and will each have their own ideas about how you should be handling the situations in your life.
- All of us experience ourselves somewhat like this already. We sometimes say, “One part of me feels (this way), but another part of me feels (that way)”. Talk to exaggerated feelings—but kindly and gently. “We will be able to manage it, especially with the help of God and others.” Seek to win their trust. If a part seems lonely, offer them a hug in your imagination. Form a relationship and aim for healing.
- Do not boss or criticize, but think of your feelings as young with only a fragmented understanding of what is happening. Let them “talk”. If they need help you don’t know how to offer, get help about what to say.
- Some people think of it as if they had small, well-meaning but scared, people inside of them. If you need to get some therapy, someone trained in Internal Family Systems will understand all of this in much more detail. Don’t go rushing into something like this if your situation is extreme. Get help.

### - Improve the moment

- Lift your mood, create moments of joy
- Involve others, bookend difficult events
- Without taking too many liberties, we can hypothesize some of this at work in Jesus’ life
  - On the night before he was crucified Jesus prayed and asked for “this cup” to pass, and he brought his disciples with him when he did so. (He brought others into his situation.) He did not get what he asked for, and when the disciples continually fell asleep, apparently he focused on the joy set before him, according to Hebrews. We *could* say he improved the moment twice before enduring the suffering.
  - Hebrews 12:2 ....looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
- Creating moments of joy
  - Joy comes in moments rather than days. We can help to create them.
  - We can’t force joy like a drug, but we can make it more likely it through things we do.
  - Your suggestions in the “Creating moments of joy” handout.



Thanks so much for your participation in this class. We'll close by promoting a moment of joy right now. I'll play "*Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*" once again, and then we'll take any final comments and say our good byes.

### *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,  
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,  
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might,  
thy justice like mountains high soaring above  
thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all, life thou givest, to both great and small.  
In all life thou livest, the true life of all.  
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
and wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,  
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight.  
All praise we would render; O help us to see  
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.

## Homework

1. Spend some time reading James 1 and Romans 8. Use the worksheets provided.
2. Look at the other handouts. I've included a page from "My Manifesto", something I have put together over the years to help me clarify what I believe. I tend to work on it when times are tough. Who knows...maybe someday I'll live up to what I've written here. Some of it is aspirational.
3. Come back to these notes when things are difficult. If you have questions, give me a call or drop me an email. I'll be glad to respond. And remember, the church staff are glad to meet with you to help you through a tough time also.

# Daily Living Purpose

- I believe that God has a purpose for each of us, and that for me that purpose is to be accomplished both within and emanating from a community of spiritually gifted, supportive Christians.
- It is my job to be aware of God's direction in my life daily so that God's purpose can be carried out.
- I also believe that God is building a large family, and that part of God's purpose for me is to invite others to join that family, demonstrating by my life that it is a desirable privilege.

## Joy

My most fundamental spiritual goal is to experience the joy of God's personal companionship in life, part of which will be experienced through my sisters and brothers in Christ. I believe that this is the greatest single source of joy available to any human being. It is a surprising thought to many people, but I do believe it is true. The article by Andrew Harvey (*What if LOVE is the REAL CHOICE?*) in the addendum to this document illustrates well the joyful power of God in one's life.

## What do I want in life?

- To be pleasing to God.
- To be led along a path of learning lessons and growing spiritually.
- To be provided with family and friends, so that my life is meaningful, having the comfort that good relationships provide.
- To be provided with my other needs also as I go through life.
- To adequately serve God and others.
- Overall, to feel cared for and directed by God.
- And lastly, to be delivered safely to a good place at the end of my life to be received by my Creator.

## Moment by Moment Questions for God

- What do you want of me in this situation?
- What people do you want me to connect with—for their benefit or mine, or the benefit of others?
- What resources are you supplying me with that I should notice?
- What do you want to say to me?
- What do you want to hear from me?

## ***This chapter of James is great when things are tough***

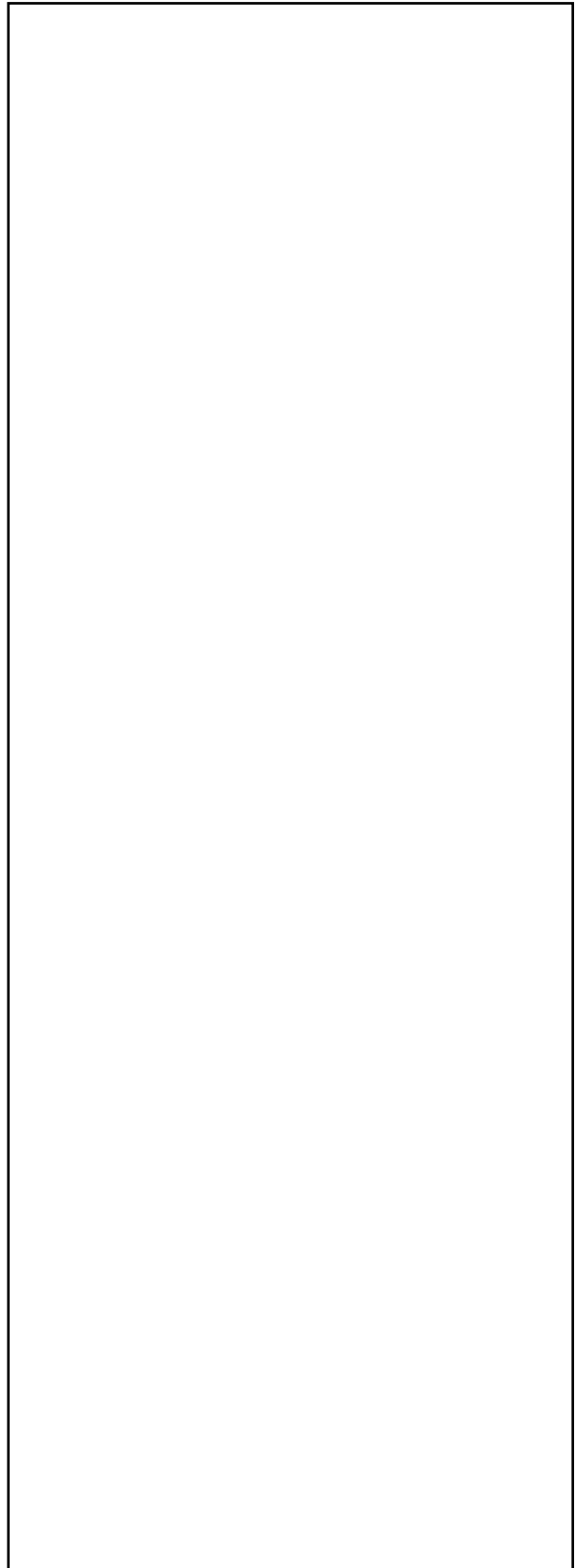
### **James 1:2-18 (NASB)**

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

**5** But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. **6** But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. **7** For that person ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, **8** being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

**9** Now the brother or sister of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; **10** but the rich person is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. **11** For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so also the rich person, in the midst of his pursuits, will die out.

**12** Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. **13** No one is to say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. **14** But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. **15** Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it has run its course, brings forth death. **16** Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters. **17** Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. **18** In the exercise of His will He gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.



# ***This chapter of Romans alone can get you through a lot***

## **Romans 8 (NIV)**

### **Life Through the Spirit**

**1** Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, **2** because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. **3** For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, **4** in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

**5** Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. **6** The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. **7** The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. **8** Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

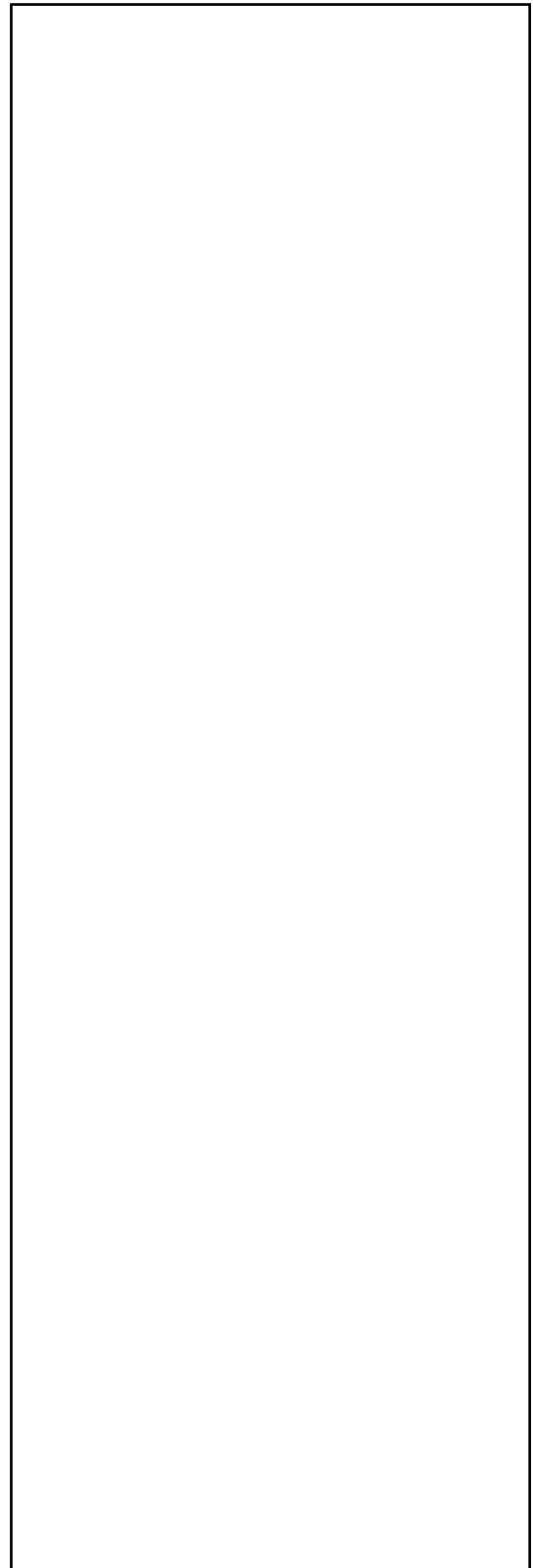
**9** You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. **10** But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. **11** And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

**12** Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. **13** For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

**14** For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. **15** The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." **16** The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. **17** Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heir of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

### **Present Suffering and Future Glory**

**18** I consider that our present sufferings are not worth



comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. **19** For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. **20** For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

**22** We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. **23** Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? **25** But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

**26** In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. **27** And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

**28** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. **29** For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. **30** And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

### **More Than Conquerors**

**31** What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? **32** He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? **33** Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. **34** Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. **35** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? **36** As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

**37** No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38** For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, **39** neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

# Creating Moments of Joy

The following are possibilities for distracting/soothing you during painful moments by creating moments of joy to counteract them. Of course, they can be good things to do at any time. It will be worthwhile to learn what types of things are emotionally uplifting for you routinely. Avoid things that have side effects that are hurtful for you.

## Hymns

How Great Thou Art  
Battle Hymn of Republic  
Morning Has Broken  
Let There be Peace on Earth  
Come and Find the Quiet Center  
On Eagle's Wings  
Spirit Song  
How Great Thou Art  
The Old Rugged Cross  
He Leadeth Me  
Open My Eyes, That I May See  
Blest Be the Tie That Binds  
It Is Well With My Soul  
My Jesus I Love Thee  
Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise  
Joy to the World  
Handel's Messiah

## Other music

Somewhere Over the Rainbow sung by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole.  
Lauren Daigle -- "You Say" is my go to anthem  
-- I am enough!  
Songs by Straight No Chaser acapella group

## Other things that soothe or distract

Hiking at Fountainhead Park on Ox Road is a favorite place to go -- Fairfax County Park  
Rocking chair in the sun on my patio  
Sing or yell at top of my lungs in my car  
Brisk walks adding stomping and air punching  
Communing with nature  
Loving my new grandson  
Reading  
Traveling  
Cooking ethnic foods, but especially my grandmother's recipes  
Devil's food cake with ganache icing  
Chocolate fudge

Popcorn  
Tapioca pudding  
Chicken pot pie  
Nostalgia tv—Andy Griffith, Golden Girls  
Buying or planting tulips  
Going for a walk, preferably near water or with a friend  
Eating Samoas (Girl Scout cookies, a rare treat)  
Spending time with loved ones  
Sitting on the beach looking for dolphins and surfers  
Soaking in bath tub  
Planning vacation  
Going to a movie in the middle of the week  
Jogging, walking  
Crossword puzzle  
Looking at photo album  
Projects around the house  
Sports—golf, tennis  
Gardening  
Meetings at church  
Going to beach or park  
Reading outside  
Laying in the sun  
Painting, writing poetry  
Calling a friend  
Seeing grandchildren  
Shopping for Christmas presents  
Writing a diary  
Going out to lunch or dinner  
Playing with pet  
Making a picnic for yourself

Google "pleasant events schedule" to get additional ideas.