Secret Church
The Cross and Suffering – Part 4
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SEVENTY-FIVE KEY TEXTS
A Biblical Theology of Evil and Suffering

Acts
46. Acts 4:23-31: Confidence in Prayer

New Testament book of Acts. Everything Jesus promised to His disciples coming true in the church. His disciples are making disciples who are making disciples of all nations, and as they do, they experience much suffering, persecution. The reality is all the New Testament was written to people who were experiencing real suffering, persecution because they were Christians. In that sense, identifying different texts here is really tough, but we are going to try our best to hit some broad themes here.

So, we're going to start with Acts 4, as the early church for the first time experiences persecution, and immediately, after they are persecuted/threatened, they pray; confidence in prayer. We learn that the church prays to the one who is in control of the world. The first words out of their mouth in their prayer: *"Sovereign Lord..."* He is in control. The one who is always faithful to His Word, knowing that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father ready to give them everything He promised them in John 14-15.

What does the church pray for? For the honor of Christ. The whole prayer revolves around the glory of Christ, the anointed one. They quote from Psalm 2. For the boldness of Christians. "Consider their threats and cause it to stop..."? No. *"Consider their threats and enable us to speak your word with great boldness."* They pray for the advancement of the kingdom. "You heal, you performs signs and wonders in the name of Christ for the demonstration of your glory in the world." They were praying with confidence for the glory of Christ to spread, the gospel of Christ to spread. Confidence in prayer amidst suffering.

47. Acts 4:32-37: Generosity with Possessions

Acts 4:32-37: Generosity with possessions. That great narrative of how the people of God in the church were caring for one another and providing for one another, for suffering brothers and sisters. John Calvin said, "We must have hearts that are harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative." What we see is that the church gives humbly to help sufferers. *"But there will be no poor among you..."* That's what we're seeing from Deuteronomy 15 and fulfilled in Acts 4.

The church gives humbly to help sufferers, and the church gives sacrificially to address suffering. People are selling possessions and sacrificing land to help each other. Generosity with possessions toward those who are suffering.

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48. Acts 5-7: Joy Amidst Persecution

Acts 5-7: joy amidst persecution. By now in the book of Acts, it's clear: the church's suffering is inevitable. It progresses from Acts 4 to 5, where the apostles are arrested and put in prison, but then listen to this commentary in Acts 5:41: "*Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."* They were rejoicing. That sets the stage for the first Christian martyr at the end of Acts 7, Stephen, and Luke, the author of Acts, shows us these parallels between Stephen's death and Christ's death.

So, the church's suffering is inevitable, but don't miss this: the church's mission is unstoppable. God uses the suffering of Stephen to scatter His church, and the gospel ends up going to places that it had never gone before, directly as a result of Stephen's death. The gospel was spreading, not in spite of persecution; the gospel is spreading because of persecution. Oh, I love this. Satan's strategies to stop the church ultimately serve to spread the church. Again, we are seeing it: Satan not only acts within the sovereign permission of God, but Satan acts to fulfill the sovereign purposes of God. Not that he wants to, but that's the way God's sovereignty works. Joy amidst persecution.

49. Acts 8: Boldness in Persecution

Acts 8: Boldness in proclamation. As they're suffering, they're scattering, what do they do? They preach! The Spirit leads the church, the Spirit empowers the church, the Spirit uses the church to advance the gospel of God and to show the greatness of God. Robert Coleman describes the early church in the book of Acts, saying, "Nothing can defeat them—not the beatings of swaggering tyrants, not the cunning of embittered religious rulers, not the internal struggles of discontented members—but like a mighty army with banners, they move out to disciple the nations in the Name of their risen and reigning Lord." Boldness in proclamation amidst suffering.

50. Acts 9: God's Sovereignty over Disease and Death

Acts 9: God's sovereignty over disease and death. We see the healing of Aeneas in verses 32-35. Then, the resurrection of Dorcas, also an unfortunate biblical name in verses 36-43. As you see these things happen, see the presence of Christ at work in His people. We are seeing mirror images, here, of what Jesus had done in and through the work of the apostles. See the presence of Christ at work in His people, and see the kingdom of Christ advancing through His people. Jesus is at the Father's right hand, but He is working, actively, by His Spirit, through His people, for His Father's glory, showing His power over sin and suffering.

51. Acts 9: Converted by Christ to Suffer

Acts 9: Paul is converted by Christ to suffer. This is the story of Saul's conversion. See the identification of Christ with His church. When Jesus comes to Saul and says, *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.",* Saul hadn't touched Jesus, but in persecuting Christians, he

was persecuting Christ. So, Jesus blinds and saves Paul, and as he does, we see the association of Paul's salvation with Paul's suffering. Salvation and suffering go together.

Jesus saves Paul and says, he "*is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name,"* (Acts 9:13-19). This is when he is saved! God says, "You are saved to suffer for my name." Salvation associated with suffering.

52: Acts 12: God's Sovereignty over Persecuted Disciples

In Acts 12, we see God's sovereignty over persecuted disciples. James is beheaded as a follower of Christ, and then, Peter, right after that, is rescued as a follower of Christ. The text never tells us why one disciple is dead and another disciple is alive. Why do some missionaries live and some missionaries die? God is sovereign over that. God holds world leaders in His hands, like King Herod, and He holds our lives in His hands. He is sovereign over life and death, persecution and suffering.

53. Acts 13-14: Paul's First Missionary Journey

When we get to Acts 13-14, we see Paul's First Missionary Journey; it's filled with suffering. Paul and Barnabas were sent by God's Spirit, confident in God's Word. They experienced victory in spiritual warfare as they were proclaiming it, Acts 13:9-12. They experienced success in gospel witness as they were spreading it throughout the whole region, Acts 13:48-49.

Yet amidst that success, they experienced slander. "*But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district,"* (Acts 13:50). They endured stoning. "*But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead,"* (Acts 14:19). Yet they remained steadfast, knowing "*that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God,"* (Acts 14:20-22).

54. Acts 16-18: Paul's Second Missionary Journey

Acts 16-18 is Paul's Second Missionary Journey. By His grace, God overcomes conflict we create inside the church. So, in Acts 15, there is conflict between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark, and Paul and Barnabas split up. So, that's on the inside, and then on the outside, for His glory, God ordains persecution we face outside the church. So, Acts 16 tells us how Paul comes to Lystra, and he meets Timothy, a young teenager, likely.

Now, the question is, "How did Timothy come to Christ?" We know that his mother and grandmother had something to do with it, but think deeper here. When Paul was in Lystra preaching the gospel, what happened? He was stoned, Acts 14:19-20, and Timothy either saw or heard the witness of Paul, and he believed. This is what happened with Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He was stoned while Paul looked on, and God used the stoning of

Stephen to bring about the salvation of Paul. Now, Paul is stoned, and God uses that, in some way, in the salvation of Timothy.

Do you see what is going on here? Satan is attacking the church from the inside and from the outside. Outside...stoning, torture, left for dead...and God says, "I'm going to use this to bring Paul his closest companion in ministry from here on out...the beloved Timothy." Inside attacks: Satan causing dissension and division in the church, between Paul and Barnabas, and God says, "I'm going to use that to create two mission teams instead of one." Take that, Satan! God's ordaining it all.

So, they followed the Spirit of God, and they celebrated the grace of God in the conversion of sinners in all these different places. In the center of a prison, they're praying and singing hymns to God, and God brings an earthquake, and He saves the jailer. The wonder of sovereign grace to lead Paul and Silas to jail and bring an earthquake while they are singing some hymns, and the jailer comes to Christ. What if God ordains suffering and persecution and pain in our lives for the sake of others' salvation?

They celebrated the grace of God as they proclaimed the truth of God. Proclaimed the truth of God, Acts 17, and they exalted the glory of God. This is Paul at Mars Hill, exalting the glory of God as the Creator of the universe, the Sustainer of life. He is the Ruler of the nations, the Savior of the needy, the Father of each of us, the King over all of us, and the Judge of the world.

They proclaimed the truth of God and exalted His glory, and they believed in the power of the gospel of God. Paul is getting discouraged in Corinth in Acts 18, and God speaks to him and says, "'*Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.'*" Oh, Christian, we are not afraid, we are not alone, we will not be silent, and we will not be stopped as we give ourselves to this mission. We will not be stopped, even by suffering. Suffering will not stop the mission; suffering will only spread the mission.

55. Acts 19-28: Paul's Third Missionary Journey

Acts 19-28 is Paul's Third Missionary Journey where we are reminded that proclamation of the gospel will always be challenged in this world. Always. Always. Proclamation of the gospel will always be challenged in the world, and proclamation of the gospel will always be costly in your life. So, knowing that, will you say with Paul, "*But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God,"* (Acts 20:22-24). So, Christian, follower of Jesus, are you willing to go wherever He leads? Are you willing to give whatever He asks? Are you willing to sacrifice everything to finish the assignment He has given us? This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This is not just for some super class of Christians. This is the very essence of following Christ.

Proclamation of the gospel will likely be costly in your life, and proclamation of the gospel will always necessitate confidence in God's sovereignty. We don't despair over gospel rejection. It is what we are seeing in Paul. We persist faithfully in gospel proclamation.

Now, that's really the story of the New Testament, and all the letters after that happen at different points within that story. So, the New Testament letters shine light on what was

happening in the book of Acts. So, we see how God was encouraging His people in the midst of suffering and persecution and expanding the church and the spread of the gospel.

Pauline Letters

56. Romans 5: Hope in Suffering (Part 1)

So let's start with Paul's Letters. The suffering apostle who wrote 13 of them in the New Testament. How do you summarize all these teach us about suffering? This is an impossible task, particularly with the time we have. This is a total disgrace to Paul, what I am about to do, to run through these things, but, yes, please forgive me for this.

So, Romans 5: Hope in suffering (Part 1). Paul says our great hope is the glory of God. We have been justified by faith, and we have peace with God, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. His glory is our hope, but watch this: the path to our great hope is the sufferings of this world. *"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame..."* (Romans 5:3-5). So, hear what Paul is saying here: our suffering produces endurance. Our endurance produces character. Our character produces hope. Hope in what? The glory of God. Suffering is a God-ordained path to greater hope in Him. So, Paul says we joyfully embrace suffering as the means by which our hope in the glory of God (which is infinitely greater than everything else in the world that we could imagine) grows.

57. Romans 8: Hope in Suffering (Part 2)

See, that just begs for us to sit here and soak it in and look at this from different angles, but we are moving on to the mountaintop of the book of Romans, Romans 8, hope in suffering (Part 2). Well-known promise that *"For those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose,"* (Romans 8:28-30). Now, this promise is so misunderstood by so many, so let's understand what this means, particularly in the context of Romans 8.

Romans 8 makes clear...this verse makes clear...that we have been saved to love God. *"God works all things together for the good of those who love him...,"* which takes you back to the beginning of Romans 8, where Paul said that we have no condemnation before God, and we are children of God. *"We have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'"* (Romans 8:14-17). He is our Father, and we love Him. So, this is key. Romans 8 addresses suffering from the perspective of a child with a loving Father in heaven, and He is the one who is working all things together for the good of His children, those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose. So, you are His child, and He is your Father in the midst of suffering.

So, what's His purpose? Second, we have been saved to become like Jesus. That's the purpose God has for His children. *"Those whom God foreknew He predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son."* (Romans 8:28-30) Now, tie this in with the reality that Paul is talking about suffering, and you realize that God ordains suffering as a part of the process, to conform us into the image of Christ. In this world, now, we suffer with Christ, Romans 8:16-17. We suffer with Him, in order that one day, we will be glorified with him. Jesus suffered. We've seen all over the Bible—Jesus a suffering servant. We've seen all over

the Gospels. Jesus has promised that as we become like Him, we will suffer with Him knowing that we will one day be glorified with Him.

So, why suffering, then? Well, listen to what Paul says. God ordains suffering to tether us to the hope of Christ. *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning...but we ourselves...groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience,"* (Romans 8:22-25). Suffering reminds us that we have a hope in something to come, something that is greater. Suffering reminds us that this world is not our home. Suffering reminds us that our treasure is in someone greater than all the futile things this world offers us. Suffering drives us to cling to Christ in hope, and right after this, Paul says that God ordains suffering to press us to the Spirit of Christ who *"helps us in our weakness,"* (Romans 8:26-27).

So, put this altogether: We have been saved to become like Christ. Suffering will only make sense in your life when you realize that God's goal in your life is not smooth circumstances and easy times; God's goal in your life is much greater than that. God's goal in your life is your full transformation of you into the image of Jesus, and if suffering is a means...a primary means...by which God brings that about, then you can rejoice because you know that your suffering is going to bring about good from your heavenly Father whom you love and who loves you. Christian, you and I can know that God is going to work every single detail, even the worst thing that happens, He is going to use every single bit of it for our sanctification, for our growth in Christ.

So, whatever you're going through now, or you will be going through in the future, it is all designed by God for our good, for our growth in Jesus, and the more you grow in Him, the more glorified He is in you, which is the whole point. We have been saved to glorify Him. That's what it means for Him to be the firstborn among many brothers. We celebrate His power. We trust His provision. This is the triumphant end of Romans 8. *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Romans 8:31-34). We rest in His ever-present, always-persevering love. Nothing can separate us from Him. Hope in suffering: Romans 5 and Romans 8.

58. 2 Corinthians 1, 4, 12: Suffering for God's Sake

2 Corinthians 1, 4, and 12: Suffering for God's sake. Another potent passage, Paul says,

> *"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. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer,"* (2 Corinthians 1:3-11).

We experience suffering in God.
So, here's the deal; here's what Paul is saying here: We experience suffering in God. As we've seen, God is sovereign over all suffering. In Christ, God is familiar with all suffering. Paul says He is the source of all compassion. He is the *"Father of mercies,"* and He is

sufficient for all comfort. He is sufficient for all comfort. The Greek word for "comfort" is used 30 different times in 2 Corinthians. So, the picture Paul gives is that God's comfort always outweighs your suffering. So, when Paul himself was suffering due to a thorn in the flesh from Satan, God said to him in 2 Corinthians 12, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

We extend comfort from God.
So, we experience suffering in God, and when we do, we experience comfort from God, which then leads to the second truth here: As we experience comfort from God in our suffering, we extend comfort from God. Paul says that we are comforted for each other's sake. Paul says, "God is comforting me, but that doesn't end with me; it extends to others. We read earlier that God "*comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction,"* (2 Corinthians 1:3-11). So, we are comforted so that we might care for each other's hurts, and so that we might carry each other's burdens.

As we experience suffering in God, we experience comfort from God, and we then extend that same comfort to others. In this way, as the church, we are a fellowship of the broken. We share in suffering together. That's part of our gathering tonight. If we have members of the body of Christ who are suffering around the world, then we suffer with them; we pray with them; we identify with them. They are not alone in their suffering.

We exult in the glory of God.
So, we experience suffering in God, extend comfort from God, and in the process, we exult in the glory of God knowing that for all of us, He is our victory, and even though we suffer, we are not destroyed; we give Him glory, 2 Corinthians 4.

God is our victory; He is our deliverer, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1. He is our hope. So, see how suffering comes full circle here. God uses suffering for our sake. God uses suffering for others' sake, and God uses suffering for His sake, and in the process suffering becomes well worth it. "*We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal,"* (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Mark it down; hold on to this: All affliction for the Christian is light and temporary. All affliction for the Christian is light and temporary, and we know that because coming glory for the Christian is vast and eternal. So, last year at this Secret Church on the doctrine of salvation, I shared about how my mother-in-law, who was sitting right over there that night, had recently been born again...regeneration...not nominal Christianity, but a new heart and a new life. A couple of months later after Secret Church, I baptized her, and she was growing in Christ on the inside, yet physically, she was struggling. She always had...she'd struggled through diabetes, breast cancer, neuropathy, degenerative eye disease, and other things, and last summer, she started to experience kidney failure, and she was put in the hospital off and on for a few weeks, and then in the middle of one night, when Heather and our kids were visiting her mom and dad in Atlanta, her mom experienced massive bleeding in her brain, went unconscious, and was rushed to the hospital, and she died the next day.

I was preparing the message for that funeral a few months ago, and the verses that kept coming to my mind were 2 Corinthians 4: *"Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. And this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."* Brothers and sisters, believe this. Know

this: You can trust in God. You can trust in Him when you have diabetes, and you can trust Him when you get breast cancer, and you can trust Him with your neuropathy, and you can trust Him with degenerative eye disease, and you can trust Him when you have kidney failure, and you can trust Him when massive bleeding takes over your brain, because in the middle of it all, you know Him; you know His strength, and you know His grace, and you know His peace, and you know His comfort, and you know His sufficiency, and when this body can take it no longer, and you breathe your last breath, and your heart stops beating, you know His victory, because you have united your life with the man who conquered death, and when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, He will be with you, and He will carry you through, and you will realize...it is absolutely true...affliction in this world is light and temporary, and glory in the world to come is vast and eternal! 2 Corinthians: suffering for our sake, for others' sake, and for God's sake.

59. Galatians 6: Boasting in the Suffering of Christ

We boast in the cross because it confronts us with the reality of our sin.
Galatians 6: Boasting in the suffering of Christ. "*Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world,"* (Galatians 6:11-18). Why do we only boast in the sufferings, in the cross of Christ, Paul? What is it about that the cross that evokes boasting? In sum, Paul says that we boast in the cross because it confronts us with the reality of our sin. We were once dead in sin, and now, in the cross, we are alive in Christ. That's worth boasting in.

We boast in the cross because it comforts us with the provision of our Savior.
Second, we boast in the cross because it comforts us with the provision of our Savior. That is the main message of Galatians: that we don't have to work to overcome our sin problem. Christianity is not about human achievement, what we can do for God. Christianity is all about divine accomplishment, what Jesus has done for us. So, we are dead to human achievement and human applause; we no longer live for the applause of men. We now live with the pleasure of God because of the cross.

We boast in the cross because it reminds us that our safety is not found in this world.
We boast in the cross because it reminds us that our safety is not found in this world. In Galatians, Paul is confronting false teachers who were preaching a false gospel in order to save their skin from persecution. So, Paul talks about how he bears on his body the marks of Jesus; something we see all over 2 Corinthians 11, and Paul says we do not fear suffering; we are now free to suffer as followers of Jesus, because our priority is not safety in this world; we are living for another world!

We boast in the cross because it keeps us from wasting our lives in this world.
Which leads to the next reason we boast in the cross: because it keeps us from wasting our lives in this world. "*This world has been crucified to me, and I to the world,"* Paul says (Galatians 6:11-18). Literally, "I am dead to the world and the world is dead to me." This world has nothing for us, Christian. We don't think like the world thinks. The world is not the source of life and satisfaction and joy. This world has nothing for us because Christ is everything to us. Paul was so swallowed up by the love of Christ that the benefits of this world combined together were as nothing to him.

We boast in the cross because it supplies us with every good thing we have.
Final reason we boast in the cross: because it supplies us with every good thing we have. So, what about when my son hits a homerun in T-Ball? Can I boast about that? Or when my other kids or my wife does something well? Is it wrong to boast in that? This is where we realize, ladies and gentlemen, that apart from the cross, apart from Christ's death on our behalf, we get nothing but condemnation. What do sinners get if their sin has not been paid for? Judgment; condemnation. As a result, every good thing we receive ultimately flows from where? From the cross! From the sufferings of Christ. Every good thing, and every bad thing that God turns for good...they all come from the cross. We take the blessings of God for granted, assuming that we deserve them or that God owes them to us, but the only way we can experience the blessing of God is because of the cross of Christ and the grace of God.

So, when I feel proud about something my son does, I boast ultimately in the cross, because Christ has made every good thing in my life possible there. This is what Paul says in verses 15-18. We don't have time to unpack it, but he says we have been re-created by His Spirit, and we will always be recipients of His grace. So, we have this incredible hymn about boasting in the cross by Isaac Watts.

60. Philippians 1, 3: Suffering and the Life That Counts

The life that counts treasures Christ above everything this world has to offer.
Philippians 1 and 3: Suffering and the life that counts. Paul says that more than anything else in all the world, he wants to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and share in the sufferings of Christ, becoming like Him in His death. So, don't miss this. Paul says the life that counts treasures Christ above everything this world has to offer. In Philippians 3, he goes through the many treasures of the wasted life: family heritage, social status, biblical knowledge, religious activity, a moral lifestyle. None of these things ultimately matter. "You put them all together, and they are like pile of dung," he says. The best things the world has to offer combined do not compare with the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. He is the only treasure of the life that counts. "Whatever gain I had, I counted it as loss for the sake of Christ."

So, Christian, in Jesus we have found someone worth losing everything for. "Take it all away; houses and cars and possessions and people and family and friends and health...it is not easy...oh, it is not easy for those things to be taken away, but Christ is better than all of them...all of that put together. "So, take my very life away, as long as I have Christ, I am satisfied." This is the key! This is the key to embracing suffering!

We are free to embrace suffering once we realize that death is a reward. Once we realize that to live is Christ and to die is gain, that changes your perspective on everything. I put a quote here from Josef Tson, a Romanian pastor who was persecuted and imprisoned and beaten for preaching Christ in Romania. He was questioned on numerous occasions and often held under house arrest. Listen to how he described one particular encounter:

> "During an early interrogation I had told an officer who was threatening to kill me, 'Sir, let me explain how I see this issue. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying.'
>
> 'Here is how it works. You know that my sermons on tape have spread all over the country. If you kill me, those sermons will be sprinkled with my

> blood. Everyone will know I died for my preaching. And everyone who has a tape will pick it up and say, 'I'd better listen again to what this man preached, because he really meant it; he sealed it with his life.'
>
> 'So, sir, my sermons will speak ten times louder than before. I will actually rejoice in this supreme victory if you kill me.'
>
> After I said this, the interrogator sent me home.
>
> Another officer who was interrogating a pastor friend of mine told him, 'We know that Mr. Tson would love to be a martyr, but we are not that foolish to fulfill his wish.' I stopped to consider the meaning of that statement. I remembered how for many years, I had been afraid of dying. I had kept a low profile. Because I wanted badly to live, I had wasted my life in inactivity. But now that I had placed my life on the altar and decided I was ready to die for the Gospel, they were telling me they would not kill me! I could go wherever I wanted in the country and preach whatever I wanted, knowing I was safe. As long as I tried to save my life, I was losing it. Now that I was willing to lose it, I found it."

The life that counts trusts in Christ to provide everything we could ever need.
That's it! The life that counts treasures Christ above everything this world has to offer, and the life that counts trusts in Christ to provide everything we could ever need. His righteousness to cover our sin. His power to guarantee our resurrection, and His satisfaction to transcend our suffering. Just like we've seen Paul talk about elsewhere, knowing Christ involves the joy of becoming like Christ, even in His sufferings. That's why he says in Philippians 1, *"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,"* (Philippians 1:29).

Did you hear that? It has been granted to you to suffer for the sake of Christ, not just to believe in Him, but to suffer for Him. This is granted to you; it's a gift! Become a Christian, and get a gift: suffer! How can suffering be a gift? Suffering becomes a gift when identification with Christ is your goal.

61. Colossians 1: Filling Up Christ's Afflictions

That leads right into Colossians 1, where Paul talks about filling up Christ's afflictions. This is a very interesting passage. He says, *"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister..."* Then, he goes on to talk about *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."*

"CHRIST"—The empowered life…
So, fill this out here. We are going to go from the back of that passage, middle of that passage, to the front. So, let's think about, *"Christ in you, the hope of glory..."* "CHRIST" – The empowered life. Think about who is in you, Christian. Jesus is the image of God. The empowered life. He is the author of creation. He is the head of the church, and He is the Savior of the world.

"IN"—The transformed life…
This is Christ, and He is "in" you. "IN" – The transformed life. Jesus died for you so that He might live in you. You no longer live, Galatians 2:20; Christ lives in you. Christianity is nothing less than the outliving of the indwelling Christ.

"YOU"—The exchanged life…
Christ in "YOU" – The exchanged life. The whole picture here is that Jesus exchanges His life with us. *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God,"* (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). He exchanged His life with us. We give Him our sin; He gives us His righteousness. He gives us His life. He has exchanged His life with us, and now we come back to the first part of the passage in Colossians 1. He exchanged His life with us to fulfill His mission through us. So, Paul says, *"I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions..."*

So, what does that mean? Was Jesus' sacrifice for sin somehow incomplete and needing to be filled up? No, what Paul is saying is that Christ suffered and died on a cross for our salvation, but there are, obviously, many people who don't know the gospel. Paul is sitting in a prison in Rome when he writes this, and he wants to get to Spain to make the gospel known there.

So, here's the picture. Jesus has shown the Father's infinite and glorious love by suffering and dying for sinners, and the only thing lacking now is a personal presentation of Christ to the nations of the world, and God is using people in whom Christ dwells...Paul, you, me...to give a presentation of His love to the world. That presentation is not easy. You don't present a suffering Christ to the world through the lens of a luxurious life. Paul was experiencing suffering and persecution at every turn, but he says that he embraces suffering because he longs for the nations to see Christ in him.

So, here's the principle...follow this: Christ suffered to accomplish salvation. That's not the reason we suffer. We suffer to spread salvation. Josef Tson, who I told you about a moment ago, put it this way: "Christ's cross was for propitiation; ours is for propagation." And in this way, God ordains our lives to complete the sufferings of Christ. Think about it: How has God shown His love to the world? Through a suffering servant, right? Well, do you think that now God is going to show His love to the world through servants who are living it up with all the comforts and possessions and stuff this world has to offer? No! That won't display the afflictions of Christ. Instead, God will use the afflictions of Christians to show that Christ is better than all of that stuff in the world put together.

God's strategy for redeeming the world to Himself has always been a suffering servant; that strategy has not changed. We saw it in Philippians 1:29. So, we gladly embrace the cross of Christ so that others might eternally enjoy the Christ of the cross. What happens when the world sees people who are willing to give their lives so that others know God's love? They see a picture of Christ.

I think about a brother I communicated with recently in Yemen, who had gone there and, as soon as he got there, there was killing that, maybe, you saw on the news of someone who was there sharing the gospel. So, the question is, "Do we leave? Do we need to be taken out of Yemen?" But, this brother was saying, "What if that is not the question? What if this drives more Christians to come?" Shouldn't it if we are going to show the afflictions of Christ? Josef Tson tells this story, and I'm not going to read it, but it is about his identification with Christ in suffering.

"THE HOPE OF GLORY"—The secured life…
Christ in you "THE HOPE OF GLORY" – The secured life. So, here's the deal: With all the suffering talk, you may be thinking, "This is risky." No, it's not. If Christ is in you, and you are in Christ, and Christ is in God, you are in a pretty good position.

62. 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12: Reminders Amid Affliction

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12: Reminders amid affliction. God has a sanctifying purpose in persecution. Paul writes about that purpose in 2 Thessalonians 1:3-5. In the end, God will administer punishment to persecutors. God's judgment will be shown. So, the church prays for steadfast faith among those who are persecuted, and for saving faith among those who are persecuting, as we were praying for earlier.

63. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: Responding to Death

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: Responding to death. Christian, our response to death is very distinct from the despair of this world. The people of God should be different. We do not grieve as those without hope. We grieve; we grieve; it's real grief, but we grieve with hope.

Our response to death is rooted in the story of the gospel. *"Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep,"* (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Jesus' resurrection is both proof that God can raise the dead, and Jesus' resurrection is a promise that God will raise the dead. *"As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive,"* (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). Our response to death, then, is strengthened by the certain return of the Lord. Paul writes, 1 Thessalonians 4, *"This we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep,"* (1 Thessalonians 4:15). One day, He will return, and His return will be personal, His return will be public. Revelation says he will come "*with the clouds, and every eye will see him..."* (Revelation 1:7).

His return will be powerful. The dead will come from their tombs, the living will come to their King, and the Lord will come to His throne! His return will be permanent. Our confidence in the face of death is celebrated and confessed for the sake of each other. That's why Paul said, "Therefore encourage one another with these words."

General Letters

64. Hebrews 10:32-39: Our Hope Amidst Suffering

That leads to the General Letters. Let's hit the high points: Hebrews 10:32-39: Our hope amidst suffering. See the barriers to our hope in this passage. The author of Hebrews says we will face trials in this world, and we will face temptations in this world. We will face trials, and we will face temptations, but the basis of our hope is clear: The faithfulness of God to His promises. God will be true to His Word, the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 6.

The basis of our hope is the faithfulness of God to His promises, and, just like we saw in 1 Thessalonians, the return of Christ for His people. He will come again a second time to come for *"those who are eagerly waiting for him,"* Hebrews 9:27-28.

65. Hebrews 11:23-26: The Reward of Suffering

Hebrews 11:23-26: The reward of suffering. This whole passage talks about how Moses chose suffering instead of sin. Moses chose suffering instead of sin. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God. Why did he do that? He chose reproach because he was looking to his reward. The reward of suffering; the reward...he is fixed on it.

66. Hebrews 11:29-40: Conquering Suffering and Continuing in Suffering

Hebrews 11:29-40: Conquering suffering and continuing in suffering. See in this passage that God is sovereign over our struggles. He is sovereign. He has sovereign power in His deliverance from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, sovereign plans in the fall of Jericho, sovereign grace in the salvation of Rahab in that passage.

God is hope in our suffering. What's so interesting about this text is the author of Hebrews says faith conquers in struggles, and he writes of people who had conquered. Then, right after that, he talks about those who, through faith, were stoned and sawed in two and killed with the sword. The point is that sometimes faith conquers in struggle, and sometimes faith continues in suffering, and God is our hope in the midst of both. Ultimately, the author of Hebrews says God is faithful for our salvation, and the clear truth at the end of Hebrews 11 is that we are not home yet. *"And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect."* We will be made perfect together.

67. Hebrews 12:1-3: The Suffering Savior

That leads, then, right into Hebrews 12:1-3 and the portrait of the suffering Savior there. To suffering Christians, the author of Hebrews writes. We lay aside the weights in this world, our sin and ourselves...lay aside...and we look ahead. *"Fix your eyes on Jesus..."* To the one who saved us in the past, to the one who is saving us in the present, to the one who shows us how to suffer for joy, and to the one who sits at the Father's right hand.

68. Hebrews 12:3-11: The Suffering Child of God

Which then leads to Hebrews 12:3-11: The suffering child of God, where the author of Hebrews talks about the discipline of God in our sin, and he encourages us to receive the Father's discipline as sons and daughters and rejoice in the Father's love. Receive His discipline, rejoice in His love knowing that His discipline is hard but helpful. God's discipline is painful, yet good. It's good for God to discipline us as a Father.

69. Hebrews 13:11-14: Suffering with Jesus Outside the Camp

Last passage in Hebrews: Hebrews 13:11-14. *"Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and*

bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come." The author of Hebrews is challenging them with some questions here: Will we die in our religion or die in our devotion? There were two major problems with the church in Hebrews: They were driven by formalism and paralyzed by fear. They were sitting back, afraid to step out of Judaism fully and proclaim the gospel, and they had two options. They could retreat from the mission, or they could risk everything for the mission. Very similar options to what the people of God had in Numbers 13-14 when they stood on the brink of the Promised Land, which the author of Hebrews continually refers to in this book.

So, he asks them: Will we embrace our comforts or will we embrace the cross? He exhorts them, "Let's go with Jesus"...this is an Old Testament reference...outside the camp to the dirty places, the despised places. The leprous person who has diseases is outside the camp. The dangerous places. The author of Hebrews is asking these Christians: Do we really want to be where Jesus is? He's telling them that mission without suffering is Christianity without a cross. Suffering is not merely a consequence of our mission; it's a central strategy for achieving our mission.

So, he asks them: Will we live for pleasure in this world or paradise in the world to come? We are living for a city that is to come. He tells them all over this book, "The best earthly security is ultimately insecure." The bottom line answer to the question earlier: it's worth it. Jesus is worth it, to pay the price to follow Jesus wherever He leads, knowing that you will receive reward.

70. James 1: Faith the Perseveres (Part 1)

That's Hebrews. James 1: Faith that perseveres. James says God is sovereign over our trials. *"Count it all joy...when you face trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness,"* (James 1:2-3). God tests our faith so that we learn to grow in His likeness; we learn to grow in Him. We learn to trust in His wisdom, we learn to rely on His resources. We learn to rely on His resources, and we learn to live for His reward. *"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him,"* (James 1:12).

God is sovereign over our trials; at the same time, we are responsible in our temptations. Don't forget the origin of sin is not in God; God is perfectly sinless, and we are utterly sinful. James shows us the anatomy of sin. *"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death,"* (James 1:14-15). Steps here: Deception, desire, disobedience, all leading to step four: Death. We are responsible for how we respond in our temptations.

God is sovereign over our trials, we are responsible in our temptations, and God is faithful for our salvation. *"Do not be deceived...brothers. Every good gift and perfect gift is from above..."* (James 1:16-18). His goodness is unchanging. His goodness is undeserved. His goodness is unending. He has saved us from our sin, and He will see us through our sorrow. Faith that perseveres, part 1, in James 1.

71. James 4-5: Faith That Perseveres (Part 2)

Then, James 4-5: Faith that perseveres (Part 2). Faith that perseveres is humble before the sovereignty of God. James 4:13-16 is all about how we can become so consumed with the material realm that we become blind to spiritual realities. To the fact that God is sovereign over our life and our death and over our activities and our accomplishments we do.

Faith that perseveres is humble before Him; faith that perseveres is obedient to the will of God, avoiding sins of omission and commission. Obedient. Faith that perseveres is confident in the justice of God. He is coming to judge the sinful in these ways. He is coming to deliver the faithful. Faith that perseveres is confident in the justice of God, and faith that perseveres is patient in suffering, James 5:7-11. Like a farmer waiting for the harvest, like a prophet speaking the truth; like Job hoping in God's purpose. Faith that perseveres is trustworthy in speech, James 5:12.

Faith that perseveres...two more pictures here...is prayerful in sorrow. *"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray,"* (James 5:13-18). Pray when you are hurting. Pray with the elders. Pray with the church. Confess your sins to each other. Don't forget: sin directly causes some sickness. So, we confess sins knowing that sin directly causes some sickness, and at the same time, sin indirectly causes all sickness. It all goes back to sin in the world. So, confess your sins to each other, and intercede on behalf of each other.

Finally, faith that perseveres is loving toward sinners. It helps a wandering brother bring him back. Earthly restoration like that saves souls and covers sins. We have eternal security in Christ; it is always a certainty, and it's accomplished through community.

72. 1 Peter: Suffering in Christ and the Christian

On Christ's Suffering…
Text number 72, 1 Peter: Suffering in Christ and the Christian. 1 Peter is a letter written to a church that was suffering and experiencing persecution, and Peter talks about Christ's suffering, how He bears our sins, and He heals our wounds. He restores our relationship with God.

On the Christian's Suffering…
On the Christian's suffering, Peter writes that suffering is often necessary for the Christian. It is necessary, he says. It is a proving ground for your faith that results in glory for God, 1 Peter 1:7. Suffering is given to you by God for your inexpressible joy. It is given to you for joy. Suffering leads you to find your security and confidence in Christ alone. Suffering spurs you on toward Christ-like belief and behavior. Look at all these things that suffering does in the sovereignty of God. Suffering leads you away from sinful lusts. In battles with sin, suffering helps you in those.

Suffering believers trust in the judgment of God. Suffering is a part of the good plan and sovereign purpose of God. Suffering unites you ultimately with Christ Himself. *"But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed,"* (1 Peter 4:13). Suffering is a reminder that the Spirit and glory of God are resting on you. Suffering is an opportunity to glorify God. *"Let him glorify God in that..."* (1 Peter 4:16). Suffering involves entrusting your soul to the care of your Creator. Suffering is spiritual warfare. Finally, suffering is a temporary stop on a path that leads to eternal

glory. *"After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you,"* (1 Peter 5:10). Oh, Peter has so much to say about suffering. Soak in that book.

73. 1 John: His Work and Our Wait

His Work of Destruction…
Text number 73: His work and our wait. *"The Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."* That's why He came. His work of destruction. The reality of sin: Sin's scope is universal. Sin's nature is lawlessness, and sin's origin is the devil. So, the reason Christ came: His essence: without sin, and His mission was to destroy sin. He came to die for it. That's His work.

So what is the result for the Christian? We confess sin, and we leave it behind. Our belief in Christ makes persistent sin inconceivable. How can we who are in Christ persist in the sin from which we've been saved? Our new birth in Christ makes persistent sin impossible, because the Christ who lives in us has destroyed the work of the devil.

Our Waiting in Anticipation…
At the same time, we know that as long as we are in this world. So, we are waiting in anticipation for the day when He comes back, and we will see Him, and we will be like Him. We will be like Him. While we wait, we fix our eyes on Him, and we purify our lives before Him. That's what the book of 1 John is all about: His work for us and in us, and our waiting in anticipation of Him.

74. Revelation 2: The Suffering Church

Text number 74, Revelation 2: The suffering church. Remember that Revelation was not written for us to inspire a "Left Behind" series. Revelation was written to us to encourage and exhort struggling and persecuted churches. We won't read through it, but see the suffering in Ephesus, the suffering in Smyrna, suffering in Pergamum, suffering in Thyatira. Jesus is saying to all of them, "Persevere. Persevere." So, how do you persevere when the Roman Empire is coming at you?

75. Revelation 5: The Conquering Lamb

With text number 75, that's how. Revelation 5: The vision of the conquering Lamb. Oh, I wish I had more time here. I'm preaching at a conference next week where I am going to dive into this, but a quick overview, and I will reference it again in a minute.

Four characteristics of Jesus in this vision in Revelation 5. He has identified the ultimate problem. We stand before a holy God hopeless and helpless in our sin, and He has paid the ultimate price. Jesus has overcome sin as a conquering Lion, and the way He did it is as a suffering Lamb.

He paid the ultimate price, and He has fulfilled the ultimate purpose. Jesus is uniquely qualified by His life, death, and resurrection to usher in the redemptive purpose of God in

history and the consummation of His kingdom forever, and as a result, Jesus now deserves the ultimate praise. *"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth,"* (Revelation 5:8-14). There is coming a day when our song will be new...it's a new song...and our song will be never-ending, and forever, we will worship the slain and slaughtered Lamb who reigns as the sovereign Lord of all. That is what we're living and longing and looking forward to.

CONCLUSIONS

1. A high view of God - His sovereignty, His wisdom, His goodness, and His glory - is essential for understanding suffering in your life and in this world.

Seventy-five key texts in Scripture leading to five conclusions. Rock-solid conclusions, I hope, to stand on that summarize everything we've seen about suffering.

Number one: A high view of God —His sovereignty, His wisdom, His goodness, and His glory—is essential for understanding suffering in your life and in this world. Now, that's a loaded statement, so let's unpack it.

God exists.
First of all, that statement implies that God exists. Now, we talked about it at the very beginning. People say, "Because there is so much evil and suffering in the world, maybe that means that God doesn't exist." Well, I just want you to know that that leads to a very empty worldview that will leave you meaningless and foolish. *"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God,'"* (Psalm 14:1). In addition to the fact that the atheist makes the blunder of absolute negation. If you're going to say that something is not there...if I were to say something is not here in this room at Brook Hills, I would have had to search out all possibilities that it is there in order to know that it's not there. If you are going to say God is not there, that means you would have to search all knowledge to see if God is there, and if you searched all knowledge, that means you have all knowledge, and by definition that makes you God, and you deny your own divinity with your own statement that there is no God. It doesn't add up. So, put that aside, look at creation.

Creation points to a cause. Whatever begins to exist has a cause, and the universe began to exist, therefore, the universe has a cause. What the Big Bang requires is an answer to the question, "Where did the universe come from?" Astrophysical evidence shows that the universe began to exist in a great explosion called the Big Bang 15 billion years ago. So, many are impressed by the evidence for the Big Bang, but the ultimate question is not what happened. The ultimate question is what caused it to happen. "Ex nihilo nihilo fit" - out of nothing, nothing comes.

There's a threefold progression here. Whatever begins to exist has a cause. The universe began to exist. Therefore, the universe has a cause. What the Big Bang requires is that the universe began to exist and was created out of nothing. That is awkward for the atheist because he/she must believe that the universe came from nothing and by nothing, but that makes no sense for out of nothing, nothing comes. Aristotle said "nothing" is what rocks dream about. Listen to this quote from Robert Zastrow, one-time director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies. He said:

> "The details differ, but the essential elements in the astronomical and biblical accounts of Genesis are the same...This is an exceedingly strange development, unexpected by all but the theologians. They have always believed the word of the Bible. But we scientists did not expect to find evidence for an abrupt beginning because we have had, until recently, such extraordinary success in tracing the chain of cause and effect backward in time...At this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."

So, look at creation; look at design. God leaves the imprints of His glory upon the design of the earth, Romans 1:18-20. That is what it is all about. Specifically, when it comes to suffering, look at morality. The existence of objective moral values points to a moral Creator. This is what Paul talks about in Romans 2. If God does not exist...follow this...then good and evil do not exist. The fact that we have a law written on our hearts by which we know if something is good or bad necessitates a moral lawgiver. There is no basis by which we could have that sense of good and evil, right and wrong, and any atheist knows this.

> "If we are purely material beings, then we should no more object to mass murder than a river objects to drying up in a drought…. Our ability to distinguish between good and evil, and to recognize these as real, means that there is a moral standard in the universe that provides the basis for this distinction. And what is the source of that moral standard if not God?" (Dinesh D'Souza)

See this: an atheistic worldview provides no objective basis for distinguishing between good and evil. Michael Ruse, noted agnostic philosopher of science, said:

> "The position of the modern evolutionist is that...morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth. Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' they think they are referring above and beyond themselves. Nevertheless, such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction...and any deeper meaning is illusory."

Kai Nielsen, Atheist Ethicist at the University of Calgary, said:

> "We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view, or that all really rational persons should not be individual egoists or classical amoralists. Reason doesn't decide here. The picture I have painted for you is not a pleasant one. Reflection on it depresses me…. Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality."

Atheism is, thus, left with hopeless subjectivity that is dependent upon the whims of changing society where culture determines what is right and wrong, and as long as culture says it, i.e., as long as Nazi Germany says it's okay to exterminate Jewish people, who's to say it's wrong? The implications are frightening. In the words of Richard Dawkins, another noteworthy atheist,

> "In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."

Can you imagine telling the victims of Auschwitz, "Sorry, Hitler and these Nazi soldiers are just dancing to their DNA. They know neither evil nor good. There is just blind, pitiless indifference that neither knows nor cares. You got a bad draw of the cards." So, we don't want to conclude, and can't conclude, that there is no God.

God exists, but even still, many people believe God exists, but He doesn't have all power, or He's not all good. So, come back to the conclusion: a high view of God—His sovereignty, His wisdom, His goodness, and His glory—is essential for understanding suffering in your life and in this world.

God is sovereign over all evil and suffering.
So, let's take each of those quickly. God is sovereign over all evil and suffering. I hope that has been abundantly clear. I think I have said "sovereign" about a thousand times. God is sovereign over evil nations and rulers, over demons and evil spirits, over temptations we face, over suffering and persecution. He is sovereign over natural disasters; He is sovereign over sickness and disease. God is sovereign over death itself.

Any attempt to minimize God's sovereign power and authority denies the testimony of Scripture and destroys the hope of sufferers. A God who cannot deliver us from suffering cannot deliver us through suffering. If God has limited power or limited authority, how can you be sure of anything He has said? Such minimization of God's sovereign power and ultimate authority ultimately defames the glory of God. We need a high view of God's sovereignty in the midst of suffering and a high view of God's wisdom.

God is wise in the midst of all evil and suffering.
God is wise in the midst of all evil and suffering. God has all knowledge and all wisdom at all times. Perfect in knowledge; He knows everything. God possesses all knowledge. He knows Himself perfectly. He knows all things perfectly, all things actual and all things possible. God knows everything at every moment. God never learns, God never discovers, and God never forgets. Even when Isaiah says He will remember our sins no more, it's not that God gets amnesia. God knows every single thing you have done. The whole point is God holds none of those sins against you.

God never forgets. He never ponders. God is never surprised or amazed by anything. We are surprised by tragedy; God is never surprised by anything. God simply knows. Which leads to the humbling, terrifying, glorious truth: God knows us completely. He knows us completely. Tozer said:

> "That God knows each person through and through can be a cause of shaking fear to the man that has something to hide – some unforsaken sin, some secret crime committed against man or God…. [But] to us who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope that is set before us in the Gospel, how unutterably sweet is the knowledge that our Heavenly Father knows us completely. No talebearer can inform on us, no enemy can make an accusation stick; no forgotten skeleton can come tumbling out of some hidden

> closet to abash us and expose our past; no unsuspected weakness in our characters can come to light to turn God away from us, since He knew us utterly before we knew Him and called us to Himself in the full knowledge of everything that was against us."

Praise God, and because God is wise, we can know that He always accomplishes the best purposes through the best means. Job, Psalms, Romans, all of this. Then, Tozer again,

> "To believe actively that our Heavenly Father constantly spreads around us providential circumstances that work for our present good and our everlasting well-being brings to the soul a veritable benediction. Most of us go through life praying a little, planning a little, jockeying for position, hoping but never being quite certain of anything, and always secretly afraid that we will miss the way. This is a tragic waste of truth and never gives rest to the heart. There is a better way. It is to repudiate our own wisdom and take instead the infinite wisdom of God. Our insistence upon seeing ahead is natural enough, but it is a real hindrance to our spiritual progress. God has charged himself with full responsibility for our eternal happiness and stands ready to take over the management of our lives the moment we turn in faith to him."

Any attempt to minimize God's knowledge and/or wisdom contradicts the testimony of Scripture and creates a god in the image of man. Which is exactly what Greg Boyd, an open theist, is doing right here. It is an insufficient answer based upon Scripture.

God is good in the midst of all evil and suffering.
God knows everything; He has all knowledge and all wisdom at all times, and God is good in the midst of all evil and suffering. Lamentations 3: "...*though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men."* This is where people ask, "If God is sovereign over evil, if He is in control over evil, then how can He be completely good?"

That's a good question, and when we look at Scripture, we realize that God relates to sin variably, meaning, in different ways. At times, we see God prevents sin. Other times, God permits sin, giving people over to their sinful hearts, Psalm 81, Romans 1. He permits sin. At times, He directs sin, like we saw in the Joseph narrative. Finally, God limits sin, but in all of this, notice this: in all of this God never directly causes sin, just like we saw in James 1.

God never sins in Scripture, and God is never blamed for sin in Scripture. Based on this, you begin to realize that God relates to good and evil asymmetrically, meaning (in different ways). Think about God behind good. As we've seen, all that is good is under His sovereignty, and all that is good is morally chargeable to God. He is not only sovereign over all that is good; He is the source of all that is good. Great quote from Jonathan Edwards about that right there.

However, God behind evil is different. Just as is the case with good, as we've seen, all that is evil is under God's sovereignty. Lamentations 3, "*Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?"* I have all kinds of examples there, but all that is evil is not morally chargeable to Him. We've seen this all over Scripture, and I have a couple of examples here, but man is morally responsible for evil. Yes, God is in control, but we make choices, and evil, from the third chapter of the Bible on, is morally chargeable to man.

Now, how all of this fits together...God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, is a mystery. Remember the mystery of God's will: God is sovereign; we are responsible. God is in

control; we make choices. However, we've seen it, haven't we? Did Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery? Yes, and they were responsible. Was God ordaining all of it for the salvation of His people? Yes, He was sovereign. Did Jewish leaders and Roman leaders crucify Jesus? Yes, and they were responsible. Did God ordain the murder of His Son for the salvation of His people before the world began? Yes, He was sovereign over that.

God is worthy of all glory in a world of evil and suffering.
God is sovereign, God is wise, God is good, and God is worthy of all glory in a world of evil and suffering. Don't miss this: Our ultimate aim in suffering is not to analyze and evaluate the character of God. Our ultimate aim in suffering is to adore and exalt the glory of God. That is the ultimate aim, knowing that He is with you in your suffering.

The God who is sovereign and wise and good and glorious is with you, and He is for you in your suffering, and so we realize that the starting point for understanding suffering is realizing that God is the center of the universe, not you or me. You and I have been created to know and enjoy His glory, and you and I have been commissioned to show and exclaim His glory. This is huge. So, trust in the sovereign wisdom and goodness of God. There is a great quote there from James Montgomery Boice when he was walking through cancer.

Trust in the sovereign wisdom and goodness of God and live to know, enjoy, and declare the sovereign glory of God. A high view of God—His sovereignty, His wisdom, His goodness, and His glory—is essential for understanding suffering in your life and in this world. Do not reduce God in an attempt to comfort yourself. You will only move your life onto sinking sand in the process. Exalt God.

2. A humble view of man - his sinful depravity and small perspective - is essential for understanding suffering in your life and in this world.

Second conclusion: A humble view of man —his sinful depravity and small perspective—is essential for understanding suffering in your life and in this world. A humble view of man...this is the other side of the coin...his sinful depravity and small perspective—is essential for understanding suffering in your life and in this world. In the words of Packer,

> "The subject of sin is vital knowledge. To say that our first need in life is to learn about sin may sound strange, but in the sense intended it is profoundly true. If you have not learned about sin, you cannot understand yourself, or your fellow-men, or the world you live in, or the Christian faith. And you will not be able to make head or tail of the Bible. For the Bible is an exposition of God's answer to the problem of human sin and unless you have that problem clearly before you, you will keep missing the point of what it says."

We have a dangerous tendency to overestimate our wisdom.
Unless you grasp the depth of your own sinfulness, you will always miss the point of suffering. While God is all-wise, as we just saw, we have a dangerous tendency to overestimate our wisdom, don't we? We think we know what's best, which leads to much of our frustration and many of our questions amidst suffering, but we need to remember our ways are not God's ways, and our thoughts are not God's thoughts, which God makes clear to Job.

Likewise, our timing is not God's timing. J.C. Ryle said,

> "There is nothing which shows our ignorance so much as our impatience under trouble. We forget that every cross is a message from God, and intended to do us good in the end. Trials are intended to make us think—to wean us from the world—to send us to the Bible—to drive us to our knees. Health is a good thing but sickness is far better if it leads us to God. Prosperity is a great mercy; but adversity is a greater one if it brings us to Christ. Anything, anything is better than living in carelessness and dying in sin."

On top of all this, our ability to comprehend is infinitely smaller than God's ability to communicate. C.S. Lewis kind of helps us on this one, "Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask—half our great theological and metaphysical problems—are like that." Spurgeon says, "Providence is wonderfully intricate. Ah! You want always to see through Providence, do you not? You never will, I assure you. You have not eyes good enough. You want to see what good that affliction was to you; you must believe it. You want to see how it can bring good to the soul; you may be enabled in a little time; but you cannot see it now; you must believe it. Honor God by trusting him."

We have a damning tendency to underestimate our wickedness.
Ladies and gentlemen, we have a dangerous tendency to overestimate our wisdom, and we have a damning tendency to underestimate our wickedness. We see evil and suffering, and we think it's unfair, but that kind of thinking completely misses the testimony of Scripture. It ignores it. Remember who we are and what we have done. We have all, every one of us, denounced the sovereignty of God. We have dishonored the holiness of God. We have despised His righteousness. We have disregarded His wrath. We have denied His love.

The effects of sin are all over us. Our minds are blinded. Our emotions are disordered. Our bodies are defiled. This is us. Our wills are distorted. Our relationships are broken, with God and with one another. All of us are slaves to sin. We are dominated by Satan. We are lovers of darkness. We are children of wrath. We are perishing. We are morally evil. Are you depressed yet? We are sinfully sick. We are spiritually dead.

Did you hear that? We have denounced God's sovereignty, dishonored God's holiness, despised God's righteousness, disregarded God's wrath, and denied His love. Our minds are blinded, our emotions are disordered, our bodies are defiled, and our relationships are broken. We are slaves to sin, dominated by Satan, lovers of darkness, children of wrath, morally evil, sinfully sick, and spiritually dead, and we want what's fair? In the words of D.A. Carson, "Do you really want nothing but totally effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell." It's true, and we know how to instruct God on what's good? Ladies and gentlemen, humble yourselves. God is not accountable to us; we are accountable to Him.

The startling realities are these: Evil is not just outside of us; it's inside of us. As we've seen, evil is all over what we do and what we fail to do. We are only different from violent criminals in degree, not in kind. Genesis 8:21, *"Every inclination of man's heart is evil from childhood."*

So, the most common question that is asked when it comes to evil and suffering is, "Why do bad things happen to good people?", and that in an of itself is a bad question. Good people? (Romans 3:10-12). *"There is no one who does good, not even one...no one righteous."* Think about it this way: we see evil and suffering in the world, all around us, but what if God is actually restraining 99.99% of evil and suffering in the world right now? What if what

we see is actually incredible evidence of His mercy that it is not any worse? His common grace is evident all over the place, even amongst unbelievers. Praise be to God for His restraint of the wickedness of man...the wickedness of our own hearts.

So, let us not rail against God in self-righteousness in a world of evil and suffering. Let us repent of sin against God in heartfelt brokenness. In order to see suffering for why it's here, we must see sin for what it is, and we must see ourselves for who we are. A humble view of man—his sinful depravity and small perspective—is essential for understanding suffering in your life and in this world.

3. The ultimate reason suffering exists is to exalt the glory of God's grace through the suffering of God's Son for the salvation of undeserving sinners.

To exalt the glory of God's grace…
Third conclusion, and really the climax of everything here tonight. This is it, right here; the tip of the spear: The ultimate reason suffering exists is to exalt the glory of God's grace through the suffering of God's Son for the salvation of undeserving sinners. Now, that is a loaded statement, so let's unpack it bit by bit.

First, the ultimate reason suffering exists is to exalt the glory of God's grace. We've seen this. God has created us for His glory. He has created us for His glory, Isaiah 43:1-7, *"whom I created for my glory..."*, and God saves us by His grace. *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved..."* (Ephesians 2:4-10). *"God...blessed us...chose us in him...predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ...to the praise of his glorious grace..."* (Ephesians 1:14).

Through the suffering of God's Son…
So, how does God save us? How does God save us? For His glory, by His grace, through the suffering of His Son. The ultimate reason suffering exists is to exalt the glory of God's grace through the suffering of God's Son. Watch this...this is key: God planned the crucifixion of Jesus before the creation of the world. Revelation 13 says names were written in the book of life of the Lamb *"before the foundation of the world..."*

So, get this: God planned the sacrifice of the Lamb, the murder of His Son, before the world was even created, before sin even came into the world. What this means is that God permitted sin and suffering in the world ultimately in order to make Good Friday a reality. Everything is pointing here, to this day. Genesis 3, God permits sin to enter into the world, right? We read about it; we talked about it. In the process, God ordains suffering to enter the world. Just like we talked about. "C*reation was subjected to futility..."*, Romans 8, by the will of God.

God permitted sin and suffering to enter into the world so that one day, in His foreordained plan, He would send His Son into the world to suffer for sinners. That was not plan B. God didn't see sin in the world in Genesis 3 and think, "Oh, what am I going to do now?" No, He permitted sin and ordained suffering in the world; plan A would be accomplished: the suffering of His Son for sinners. God permitted murder in Genesis 4, Cain and Abel, so that His Son would be murdered according to Acts 4.

For the salvation of undeserving sinners…
All of that is for the salvation of undeserving sinners. So, quick recap...stay with me here...this is huge. God permits sin to enter the world. God ordains suffering to enter the world. God sends His Son into the world to suffer for sinners, and God saves undeserving sinners for the glory of His grace. Full circle. God saves sinners by His grace...by His grace, He saves them...through His Son's suffering. Jesus absorbed God's wrath through suffering. Jesus bore our sins through suffering. Jesus purchased our forgiveness through suffering. Jesus provided us righteousness through suffering. Jesus defeated death through suffering. Jesus disarmed Satan through suffering. Jesus reconciled us to God through suffering.

All of these things that Jesus did for us, He did through suffering. God ordained suffering to enter into the world so that His Son, through His suffering, might save sinners for His glory. He saves them for His glory. Look back at Revelation 5. We talked about it and went over it pretty quick, but look at this scene in heaven: *"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...'"*

So, see this. In heaven, Christ is pictured as a Lamb looking as if it has been slain. Don't miss this: For all of eternity, the slaughtered Lamb of God who suffered on our behalf will be at the center of our worship. We will sing to the Lamb who looks like He's been slaughtered. That's the literal translation of that word "slain". Forever, we will praise Jesus for the glory of God's grace. That's the whole purpose in the history of suffering. He suffered on our behalf to save us from our sins, and all of that was planned before time even began. This is the ultimate reason we have suffering in the world: to exalt the glory of God's grace through the suffering of God's Son for the salvation of undeserving sinners. Good Friday is the whole key to understanding suffering.

Everything revolves around Good Friday. From eternity past to eternity future, Good Friday is at the center. The ultimate reason suffering exists is to exalt the glory of God's grace through the suffering of God's Son for the salvation of undeserving sinners who will, forever and ever, praise the Lamb who looks like He has been slain, who has risen as the conquering Lion and Lord over all.

4. God ordains suffering for the Christian in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes.

Fourth conclusion: God ordains suffering for the Christian in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes, and I use that word "ordains" intentionally. God doesn't just permit suffering as if it's kind of out of His hands. He ordains it. He designs it in our lives for a variety of purposes. Now, there is a theology that I have mentioned a couple of times that is alive and well today in America and all of the world that says, "God doesn't want you to suffer; He only wants you to prosper." In the words of Kenneth Hagin, one of many advocates of what would be called the "prosperity gospel," which is no gospel at all:

> "Jesus, however, came to redeem us from Satan's power and dominion over us…. We are to reign as kings in life. That means that we have dominion over our lives. We are to dominate, not to be dominated. Circumstances are not to dominate you. Poverty is not to rule and reign over you. You are to rule and reign over poverty. Disease and sickness are not to rule and reign over you. You are to rule and reign over sickness. We are to reign as kings in life by Christ Jesus, in whom we have our redemption."

The Definition & Deception of the "Prosperity Gospel"
The definition of the "Prosperity Gospel": It's a theology, which believes that God's aim is to make believers healthy and wealthy in this life. We enjoy excesses. We live like King's kids, but this theology is filled with deception. The consistent error in the "prosperity gospel" involves ripping texts from contexts. I don't have time to go through all these, but 3 John 2, does prayer guarantee health and wealth?

Mark 10:29-30, "Have those who claimed the benefits paid the price?" He promises persecutions in the middle of that. Psalm 103, "Is this general praise or a guaranteed promise?" James 5, a passage that is intended to teach that faith is patient in suffering, and faith is prayerful in sorrow, but prosperity theologians run right past the contexts of those to suit their own desires.

Aside from that, never mind the counter-examples to prosperity theology, starting with the life and teachings of Jesus. You look at His life, and it's not the "health and wealth gospel". More like the "homeless and wounded gospel". Prosperity theologians run right past the core example and teaching of Christ that God may accomplish higher purposes in our death than in our life.

Or what about the life and teachings of Paul? All these troubles, hardships, persecutions that he went through. Paul lost everything. I wonder if in his dreams the apostle ever heard a faint chorus of voices from the future saying, "Paul, you don't have to live like this. Why don't you trust God and live like a king's kid?" Paul's theology is not the "prosperity gospel". It's more like the "adversity gospel", because Paul realizes that God may accomplish higher purposes in our sickness than in our health.

> *"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,'"* (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

So, when God chose not to heal Paul of his thorn in the flesh, Paul didn't name it and claim it and demand that God heal him. Instead, he acknowledges God's spiritual purpose in his adversity. Today's health/wealth preachers bypass that and say, "Well, the thorn was from Satan." Yes, but God was sovereign over it. Satan would never give anyone something to keep him from being conceited. God is the one who intended the thorn for Paul's good. It wasn't Satan but God who refused to remove it, despite Paul's pleadings; it was God. If you've prayed for healing and not received it, take heart; you're in good company! God uses these things for His good and glorious purposes. I love Randy Alcorn putting things in perspective:

> "When Paul was taken in chains form his filthy Roman dungeon and beheaded at the order of the opulent madman Nero, two representatives of humanity faced off, one of the best and one of the worst. One lived for prosperity on earth, the other didn't. One now lives in prosperity in heaven, the other doesn't. We remember both men for what they truly were, which is why we name our sons Paul and our dogs Nero."

The Dangers of the "Prosperity Gospel"
Don't forget the dangers of the "Prosperity Gospel". It overlooks the design of suffering. Christians may suffer despite their righteousness, and Christians may suffer because of their

righteousness, and it fails to acknowledge the necessity of suffering. Yes, isn't that what we've seen? God ordains suffering for the Christian. There is no question. I have Scripture after Scripture there reminding us of that.

God ordains suffering for the Christian…
Now, God ordains suffering for the Christian in a variety of ways. The Christian may suffer with sickness, contrary to the garbage that Joel Osteen spreads. Can you imagine Joel Osteen saying, "Paul, just tell yourself, 'My mind is alert. Every cell in my body is increasing and getting healthier. I'm getting better every day in every way.'" No! Paul's got a thorn in his flesh, and God put it there. It's not best life now; best life later.

God ordains suffering for the Christian in a variety of ways…
The Christian may suffer with sickness. The Christian may suffer from disaster, Luke 13. The Christian may suffer through various struggles of all kinds. The Christian may suffer in persecution.

In the midst of all these different types of suffering, remember this: Regardless of what type of suffering the Christian experiences, the Christian suffers "with Christ" or "for Christ" or "in Christ." Satan intends every type of suffering to sabotage, and God intends every type of suffering to sanctify.

God ordains suffering for the Christian in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes.
So, God ordains suffering for the Christian in a variety of ways, and we will suffer for a variety of purposes. Think of all the purposes that we have seen. Just kind of listen here: to refine our faith. God ordains suffering to reveal His glory. Refine our faith, reveal His glory to us, to others that they might see His glory more clearly through us. We've got example after example. God ordains suffering to teach us to rely on Him. That's a good thing. I love what Martin Luther said. He was talking about these people in the Roman Catholic Church standing up and threatening him amidst the Protestant Reformation. He said, "The devil will afflict you [and] will make a real doctor of you, and will teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God's Word. For I myself...owe my papists many thanks for so beating, pressing, and frightening me through the devil's raging that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to a goal I should never have reached." That's great.

God ordains suffering to teach us to rely on Him, to bring us to repent and renounce sin in our lives. All these examples. God ordains suffering to lead us to our reward in Him, Matthew 5, 2 Corinthians 4.

All of these purposes have one common end.
All of these purposes have one end, one main end: Joy in Christ. Joy. We aren't talking happy-go-lucky, just all easy. "Suffering, I love it." No, we're talking about when the circumstances are tough and everything is caving in around you, you know that you have something here that nothing in this world can rob you of. You have a treasure here that, even if your life is gone, you have Christ and that's gain. Joy in Christ; that's how we rejoice in suffering.

Joy in Christ to the glory of God. I love what Joni Erickson Tada says here. I told you she has spent most of her life in a wheelchair due to paralysis. She writes,

> "I hope in some way I can take my wheelchair to heaven. With my new glorified body I will stand up on resurrected legs, and I will be next to the Lord Jesus. And I will feel those nail prints in his hands, and I will say, 'Thank

> you, Jesus!' He will know I mean it, because he will recognize me from the inner sanctum of sharing in the fellowship of his sufferings. He will see that I was one who identified with him in the sharing of his sufferings, so my gratitude will not be hollow. And then I will say, 'Lord Jesus, do you see that wheelchair over there? Well, you were right. When you put me in it, it was a lot of trouble. But the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be. I do not think I would ever have known the glory of your grace were it not for the weakness of that wheelchair. So thank you, Lord Jesus, for that. Now, if you like, you can send that thing off to hell."

That's good. That's good.

5. The completion of the Great Commission will include great suffering, but eternity will prove it was worth the price.

All right, last conclusion...75 texts, 5 conclusions, number 5: The completion of the Great Commission will include great suffering, but eternity will prove it was worth the price.

The completion of the Great Commission…
"The completion of the Great Commission..." So, the Great Commission, brothers and sisters, one day will be completed. *"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come,"* (Matthew 24:14). That's why Jesus said, based on His sovereign authority, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."* (Matthew 28:18-20). Now follow this: The Great Commission is not a general assignment to make disciples among as many people as possible. It's not just, "Go and make disciples..." It's a specific command, it's a specific assignment to make disciples among every people group on the planet, all the nations. We know that "nations" here doesn't refer to "nations" like we think of today...the 200 or so countries in the world. "Nations" here refers to ethnic groups. The Bible today...Amorites and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Berber and the Baloch and the Hui and the Han...groups of people that share common languages and common cultural characteristics.

The number of people groups estimated worldwide as of this week is 11,487, Jesus has told us to make disciples among every single one of them. Well, how are we doing? Well, missiological scholars have researched these people groups and classified how many of them are still "unreached" with the gospel, which basically means most of the people in that people group have yet to hear the gospel. To be unreached does not simply mean to be lost. Unreached deals with access. People say, "Well, there's unreached people all around you in Birmingham." No, there are lost people in Birmingham, but people in Birmingham have access to the gospel. There are churches, radio, TV; there are Christians with access to the gospel.

But there are people around the world who don't have that kind of access. To live in an unreached people group basically means that you are born, and you live, and you die without ever even hearing the gospel, and the number of people groups that are still unreached with the gospel 6,619. Out of those groups, some of them are also classified as unengaged, meaning there is no one at this moment intentionally working to reach that people group through church planting, and the number of people groups still unreached and unengaged with the gospel: 3,367. Brothers and sisters, this is not acceptable for us.

50,000 brothers and sisters, hear this: this is not acceptable for us. Especially when we know that this Great Commission will be complete one day.

Revelation 7:9-10: There is coming a day when every tribe, tongue and nation will gather around the throne and sing His praise. One day they're all going to be reached. The gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. Christian, do you want the end to come? Now, people may say, "What? Are you saying that Jesus couldn't come back tomorrow or tonight because there's still 6,000 plus people groups that are unreached?" That's not what I'm saying. The reality is we don't know if we've got people groups classified perfectly, and we don't know what it means to be officially reached, as God's thinking about that, but this is where I can't improve on the words of George Ladd, who called Matthew 24:14 the most important single verse in the Word of God for the people of God today. He said,

> "God alone knows the definition of terms. I cannot precisely define who all the nations are, but I do not need to know. I know only one thing: Christ has not yet returned; therefore, the task is not yet done. When it is done, Christ will come. Our responsibility is not to insist on defining the terms; our responsibility is to complete the task. So long as Christ does not return, our work is undone. Let us get busy and complete our mission."

The completion of the Great Commission will include great suffering…
However, know this: The completion of the Great Commission will involve great suffering. Right before Matthew 24:14, *"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another,"* (Matthew 24:9-14).

Suffering. Jesus said it; He promised it. *"If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you,"* (John 15:20). The church in Acts demonstrated it over and over and over again. Stoned, beheaded and going through many tribulations. Paul spoke about it, suffering for the spread of the gospel. *"All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..."* (2 Timothy 3:12). Early Christians experienced it. Early church leaders like Tertullian said, "We [Christians] multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed." Jerome said, "The Church of Christ has been founded by shedding its own blood, not that of others; by enduring outrage, not by inflicting it. Persecutions have made it grow; martyrdoms have crowned it." Revelation anticipates it. Listen to Revelation 6:

> *When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.*

Do you hear that? There are a number of martyrs that are yet to be completed in the name of gospel advance to the ends of the earth. So, this is the unavoidable conclusion church: The more passionate we become about spreading the gospel to every people group in the world, the more we will suffer. It makes sense, right? Satan knows that when the gospel has been proclaimed to every nation, the end will come, and the end is not good news for him. Satan is prolonging the end as long as he possibly can, which means, as you give your

life to advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth, you can expect to be met in force by the devil and all the demons of hell.

The completion of the Great Commission will include great suffering, but eternity will prove it was worth the price.
The completion of the Great Commission will include great suffering, but eternity will prove it was worth the price. Revelation 12 tells us that there's coming a day when Satan,

> *"…The deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.'"*

There is coming a day when Christ will be honored as King. The salvation of God will be here, and the power of God will be here, and the kingdom of God will be here! The devil will be cast down in defeat, that ancient serpent of the garden, the great adversary, Satan, the accuser of believers. Indeed, Martin Luther...

> A mighty fortress is our God, A bulwark never failing;
> Our helper He, amid the flood Of mortal ills prevailing.
> For still our ancient foe Doth seek to work us woe;
> His craft and pow'r are great, And, armed with cruel hate,
> On earth is not his equal.
>
> Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing;
> Were not the right Man on our side, The Man of God's own choosing.
> Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
> Lord Sabaoth, His name, From age to age the same,
> And He must win the battle.
>
> And tho' this world, with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us,
> We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph thro' us.
> The Prince of Darkness grim—We tremble not for him;
> His rage we can endure, For lo, his doom is sure,
> One little word shall fell him.

The church will rise up in victory by the blood of Christ shed on a cross. The church will rise up by the blood of Christ, and the accusations of the devil will be empty, and the peace of Christ will be eternal. The church will rise up in victory by the blood of Christ shed on a cross, and by the lives of Christians sacrificed in this cause. Believers who shared in Christ's sufferings. Believers who participated in Satan's defeat. I love Revelation 12. When Satan uses persecution to destroy the life of a believer, he ultimately participates in their eternal delight and his own eternal destruction.

So Christian, the question tonight is, "Are you willing to embrace suffering for the accomplishment of the Great Commission?" Will you embrace suffering like Adoniram and Ann Judson who, 200 years ago, set sail for Myanmar/Burma. Adoniram had written this letter to Ann's dad, asking for his permission to marry his daughter. Listen to what he wrote:

> "I have now to ask whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world? Whether you can consent to her departure to a heathen land, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of a missionary life? Whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death? Can you consent to all this, for the sake of Him who left His heavenly home and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion and the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with a crown of righteousness brightened by the acclamations of praise which shall redound to her Saviour from heathens saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair?"

Can we write that? Can you write that? Moms and dads, are you raising up children who you want to do exactly that? Are you going to freely send your kids? Are we going to freely send our kids to the nations, even if it means their lives? Are we just playing games here, or is this real? Where are the married couples, the singles, the families who will take that outlook on life? During thirty-eight years overseas, Adoniram Judson lost two wives and seven children to premature death. Yet today, there are nearly four thousand Baptist churches with over half a million followers of Christ in the heart of Buddhist Burma/Myanmar. Adoniram and Ann Judson believed the accomplishment of the Great Commission was worth their lives.

So, did John and Betty Stam, in their mid-20s with a 3-month-old daughter, serving in China in the 1930s. One day Betty was bathing their little girl when the Red Army surrounded their house, came in, and took them captive. They made them walk to another city, where they bound John to a post for the night. The next day, they forced both of them to walk in their underwear through the streets of the town where crowds gathered to watch their execution. They beheaded John first while Betty watched, and then when she fell over his dead body, they beheaded her. When the China Inland Mission notified Betty's parents back in New Jersey about what had happened, the Mission received a telegram response promptly back from her parents. It said, "Deeply appreciate your consolation. Sacrifice seems great, but not too great for Him who gave Himself for us. Experiencing God's grace. Believe wholeheartedly Romans 8:28."

When she heard it, Betty's sister, Helen, wrote to her parents:

> "Dearest Daddy and Mother, you don't need to hear me say how much we love you and are thinking of and praying for you in these days…I have such radiant pictures of Betty and John standing with their palms of victory before the Throne, singing a song of pure joy because they had given everything they had to their Master, that I cannot break loose and cry about it as people expect. Crying seems to be too petty for a thing that was so manifestly in God's hands alone; but my heart is very, very sore for you."

So, I ask every Christian and every family and every small group and every church listening tonight: Are you willing to embrace suffering for the accomplishment of the Great Commission? These unreached people groups are unreached for a reason. They're hard to reach. They're difficult to reach. They're dangerous to reach. So, are we willing to give our lives, and to lose them, if necessary, to see this Commission accomplished? Who, from tonight, is God calling to go to the Horn? Who, from tonight, is God calling to go to Central Asia, the Middle East, East Asia, different parts of the world? My challenge is for 50,000

people tonight to put a blank check on the table with no strings attached and say, "Are you calling me?" Leave the blank check there and see what He does with it. That is a given for anyone who is a follower of Christ. We can trust Him with our salvation; we can trust Him with our lives. We want His glory more than we want our lives. The purpose of our lives is not to coast this thing out in a nice, comfortable Christian spin on the American dream.

Consider what's at stake. For all who reject the King, hell will be a place of irreversible justice. Eternal, everlasting, never-ending suffering, and for all who revere the King, heaven will be a place of inexpressible joy. It will be worth it! We will be with Him, in a place where death will be replaced by life. No more sin. No more sorrow. No more sickness. No more separation. Night will be replaced by light. Corruption will be replaced by purity, and curse will be replaced by blessing, and we will see His face. Fanny Crosby, blind hymn writer, said,

> Some day the silver cord will break,
> And I no more as now shall sing,
> But, O, the joy when I awake,
> Within the palace of the King.
> And I shall see Him face to face,
> And tell the story saved by grace.
>
> Some day my earthly house will fall,
> I cannot tell how soon 'twill be,
> But this I know, my All in All
> Has now a place in heaven for me.
> And I shall see Him face to face,
> And tell the story saved by grace.
>
> Some day, when fades the golden sun
> Beneath the rosy-tinted West,
> My blessed Lord will say, "Well done!"
> And I shall enter into rest.
> And I shall see Him face to face,
> And tell the story saved by grace.
>
> Some day— till then I'll watch and wait,
> My lamp all trimmed and burning bright,
> That when my Saviour opens the gate,
> My soul to Him may take its flight.
> And I shall see Him face to face,
> And tell the story saved by grace.

This is the claim of Christ in Revelation. He says, "I am coming soon to assert my reign over sin and to remove all suffering." He says three times, "Behold! I am coming soon." "Behold! I am coming soon." "Behold! I am coming soon." *"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon,'"* (Revelation 22:20). So, the cry of the church, in our lives in the church, in a world of sin and suffering is clear: Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!

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