

Introduction

Good morning!! You are the beautiful bride of Christ...look at you church....you are gorgeous! That is what Jesus is saying right now! WOW...look at the beauty of these people who seek to glorify my Father by worshiping with clean hearts and selflessly loving with clean hands. They are in love with my Word and they know me because I first knew them and loved them. We are the beautiful bride of Christ being made more resplendent each day into the image of Christ. You are beautiful!!!

Gerald has been preaching through the book of Revelation that records the visions given to John through Christ and His angels. Thematically, Revelation speaks to the truth that God rules history and will bring it to a triumphal climax in Christ.

At the center are the visions of Christ and God, where God displays His majesty, authority, and righteousness as the Ruler and Judge of the universe.

The vision recorded in chapter 1, is Christ appearing as the majestic King and Judge of the universe and Ruler of the churches. In chapters 2 and 3 Christ addresses specific needs of each church and reminds them of His powerful promises and the profundity of their calling. Chapters 4 – 22 include a series of visions intended to open the eyes of Christian believers to the:

- kingship and majesty of God
- nature of spiritual warfare
- God's judgements on evil and the outcome of the conflict

God must – and will – win the battle, but His forces are opposed by Satan who leads the whole world astray with lies and attacks. Satan – the great dragon - has two agents, the “beast” and the “false prophet” who together with him make up a counterfeit trinity.

In opposition to these threats the saints – those whom God has called and have faith in Jesus- must maintain a true and faithful witness, even to the point of martyrdom (Rev 6:9-11). And we must maintain a true spiritual purity while in the midst of intense suffering and spiritual warfare that calls us to stand firm proclaiming the entire Word of God and our faith in Jesus Christ. In the new heaven and earth – your witness church – our witness as the church – finds fulfillment in the final light of Gods truth, and the purity and beauty of the church takes perfect form in the spotless bride of the Lamb.

In summary, God's Word in Revelation is about the glory and majesty that await us on God's celestial shores. And gives us glimpses of God's amazingly abundant and rich character of majesty, glory, radiance, beauty, righteousness, sovereignty, providence, mercy, and grace. And it is His final word – indeed the final period - on the grand redemptive narrative that defines His plan for mankind. Both those marked by and claimed by God as gifts to Jesus, and those who are not and destined for hell.

Eternity with The Creator Father God is breathtakingly spectacular, filled with hope and promise for the glory that awaits us! I yearn and long for it! Do you? A place of no sin, tears, pain, tragedy or treachery!!

But now....we live here. A place where Satan's evil trinity walk to and fro – never resting – a roaring lion Peter says prowling at the door sniffing for a soul to devour and destroy. In the guise of light and sweetness spreading lies that God is not to be trusted and therefor encouraging us to enter into moral bankruptcy in exchange for an endlessly mad pursuit of pleasure and happiness that never satisfies and always leaving us in a worst place than before. Satan's goal is destruction of relationships, faith in God, and your life.

Spiritual warfare with the enemy is real. If you do not believe it is real then you are at risk of attack. Church – you need to be prepared and trained for spiritual warfare.

Today, the Lord has asked that I speak to you about our cultural context and when you are most likely to be vulnerable to attack, why that is, and what you need to do to prepare.

Prayer

Abba, I come before you, standing on the truth and wisdom of your inerrant Word, a little child, weak and needy, with nothing to bring to you except an imperfect faith in you, and an imperfect love for Jesus, and a love for your Word. Please anoint the words that come from my mouth to be glorifying to you, a sweet aroma, and for you, even now, to open the ears and hearts and minds of those receiving this word today to wrestle with the hard questions around your promises to lead us into seasons of suffering and how we are to respond in a way that glorifies you. Come Holy Spirit, attend to our hearts and souls, Come Lord Jesus and be with us now. Amen.

Why is it important that we are prepared for the attack of suffering?

Because God calls His adopted sons and daughters in Christ to maintain a true and faithful witness, even to the point of martyrdom.

Rev 12:10-12

10[†] 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.** 11 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. 12[†] **Therefore, rejoice,** O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

When are you most likely to experience intense attack by the enemy? It is when you are walking your own personal *via dolorosa*. The road of intense suffering. When your world is turned upside down.

Like Job, many of you have experienced that gut wrenching blow. The death of a loved one. The tragic death of a young life filled with promise never to be fulfilled. Cancer. The unfaithfulness of a spouse to the marriage vows, the abandonment of a parent, a pregnancy that never delivers life, walking with someone as dementia slowly steals the mind. An automobile accident. Failing health. The list goes on and on. For each one of us.

Suffering is real. It was real for Job and it is real for you. But consider for a moment that God **chose** Job to be one of His suffering servants – an instrument through whom to accomplish a spiritual triumph. God introduces Satan to Job. Satan had never thought about Job. Satan has the audacity and arrogance to confront God and falsely accuses Job of serving God for the sake of material blessings. God gives Job the high calling of remaining true to God even when his entire world is turned upside down and the grim reality of daily suffering is his new lot in life – his new vocation - with the loss of all material possessions, his children, and his health.

Will Job do as Satan predicts, curse God to His face? This is the question that drives the dramatic narrative as Job loses his confidence, sinks into despair, and has no help from his wife or friends.

God calls each of us to suffering. He promises to do so. **Peter in his first epistle prepares us in 1:6-8:**

“if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the **tested genuineness of your faith** – **more precious than gold** that perishes though it is **tested by fire** – may be found to **result in praise and glory and honor** at the revelation (last day of history) of Jesus Christ”

And again **4:19** “therefore let those who suffer according to **God’s will** entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good”

Paul in **Romans 8:16** The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17[+] and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, **provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.**”

God promises that we shall suffer and that He will not deliver us from the suffering but will deliver us through the suffering as it prepares us for glory that awaits the faithful on the last day of history.

The Bible presents a world that you live in – filled with dysfunction, disappointment, painful trials, and universal suffering.

Within moments of our original mitochondrial DNA parents committing cosmic treason in the Garden of Eden, sin and suffering enters the world and becomes the norm. The Bible presents a horribly broken world populated by fallen broken people where nothing or no one functions in the way that God intended. And amazingly, the Bible presents the full horizon and landscape of brokenness, sin, and suffering in the first book of the Canon.

In Ge 3 we read of Adam failing to assume his position of familial headship and spiritual authority and take corrective action. Eve believing Satan’s lies that God is a liar and not to be trusted and that the wisdom and self-determination of mankind is all that is required for happiness. It was the beginning of humanism. The ensuing verses reveal the train wreck of **destruction that is always Satan’s goal (spirit of separation)** - Adam and Eve’s sin destroy the perfect relationship with God and each other, and as a result mankind’s character and nature is forever marked with shame, guilt, loneliness, anxiety, fear, exposure, pride, blame shifting, deception, lying, and idolatry. God promises us pain and suffering in child birth and hard difficult work to provide food, shelter, clothing, and a finality to our days – there will be physical death.

We will physically die. Death, as DA Carson points out in his book on Suffering is a pronouncement of judgement by God. In His sovereign righteousness, God decreed in Ge 6:3 “My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh; his days shall be 120-years.”

And in Ge 4 the first murder. Not just homicide but fratricide. Cain fails to acknowledge that all things that we produce are a gift from God and that He sovereignly reigns and owns everything known and unknown, and that we are called to joyfully worship and honor God by giving back to God a portion of the works of our hands. God warns him “sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you”. The sin of your heart desires to destroy you if you do not control it. Jealousy fueled by whispering lies of the enemy fuel a consuming hatred that results in Cain murdering his own brother.

Scriptures present the drama of human existence as it really is. There is no sugar coating. It is graphic and real. There are stories that are so twisted and dark that if they were a Netflix movie you probably would not watch it and certainly would not allow your children to watch it.

Noah’s daughters get their father drunk and then sleep with him to get pregnant. Murder, abject life-sucking poverty, extreme bullying, unfaithful marriages, emotional and physical abuse, divorce, scandal, corrupt governments, corrupt judges, corrupt people, selfishness, slavery, murderous jealousy, manipulation, judgement for the sake of one’s pride and position, first born children murdered to appease non-existent pagan gods, anxiety, fear, and the unjust execution of Jesus.

Suffering is real. The whole of the Bible is filled with stories of real people suffering real things and how God meets them in their travail.

We all know people who are suffering very horribly right now. People in this fellowship, your LG, friends, family, and people at work. The death of a spouse, child, or close family member. Cancer. Divorce. A marriage that is crumbling. Dysfunctional families. Addictions – drugs, alcohol, sex, power, greed. 50 year olds running around in 2-year old suits screaming for attention and love. The effects of old age – bodies that don’t work any more. Brains that have begun that slippery downward slope of dementia. Loss of a job. The trap of the vortex of poverty. Warped gender identity. Extreme selfishness - pride, selfishness and self-righteousness, - that has driven a wedge of separation between friends and family leaving them alone, discouraged, complaining, and bitter. Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The list goes on and on. We are surrounded by the affects of the fall – we are surrounded by death, disease, and destruction.

You have suffered, are suffering, or will suffer. We all suffer in this life. But our culture tells us we don’t have to suffer.

Culture and Suffering

Many Christians today have a functionally operating soft prosperity gospel mindset that is a result of living in the economically wealthiest nation in the history of the world and abject, unabashed selfishness. But the real culprit is the pursuit of happiness coupled with the American dream - get rich, retire early, play, enjoy, collect and play with your toys, and this insidious lie that we do not have to suffer.

The pursuit of happiness is twisted and warped by a humanistic world view that uses it as the foundation to encourage and feed all of my selfism's – selfishness, self-reliance, self-righteousness, and self-determination. And The American Dream is simply not scriptural nor is it eternal and it will never ever produce lasting joy, peace, and happiness.

The reason this soft prosperity gospel will always fail to deliver upon its promises of happiness and no suffering is based upon the reality that it is only achieved by placing our love, faith, trust, and hope in things of this world and holding them up as idols worthy of pursuit and to sustain at all cost because they have become our identity. Steelers, UNC, Duke, trucks,

In Luke's account of the rich young ruler in chapter 18 beginning of vs 18 we learn that the young man was rich. He was very financially successful implying that he was likely a shrewd negotiator. And yet he walked away from the most valuable extravagant business deal. His wealth and status defined him. And he traded eternal life for the things of this world that identified him and whose calculus determined his value.

John in his first epistle: **1 John 2:15 do not love the things of this world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him. For all is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.**

The American Dream coupled with the name it and claim it prosperity gospel that defines the culture around us is of this world and if we love these things – if we permit these things to define our identity and value – then God's Word says – the love of the Father is not in us and by extension neither is Jesus or the Holy Spirit. The American Dream and prosperity gospel suggest that you do not have to suffer and if you have the right kind of faith you will not. That ... is all a lie from the Devil. God promises us we will suffer.

So how do you deal with suffering?

How do those you know deal when hardships knock on the door?

What happens when very real, life changing events blow up the course and cadence of your life?

How do you deal with the pain and heartache?

Where is God in the midst of this horrible event?

What is your identity rooted and grounded in or on?

What does your self-worth and identity need to be sustained?

What happens to your identity when the things of this world are removed from your life?

We will examine these questions, expose the truth of suffering, and identify the traps we need to watch for, and reinforce God's promises.

Truths of Suffering

1. Suffering is never neutral
 - a. You never just suffer the thing that you're suffering, but you always also suffer ***the way that you're suffering*** that thing.
 - i. 2-people will suffer the same thing differently because of the way that they suffer
 - ii. How do you suffer the thing that you are suffering? What can you do now?
 - b. Most importantly - Know your heart –
 - i. ***Psalm 139:23[†] Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! 24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!***
 - ii. ask God to reveal the truth of your heart to you... and become very aware of the good fruit of the Spirit and the bad fruit of the flesh:
 - iii. ***Gal 5:19 19[†] Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20[†] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21[†] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22[†] But the fruit of the Spirit is***

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

- iv. The roots of your heart produce either good fruit or bad
 - v. Roots of sin produce rotten flesh oriented fruit
 - vi. fruit of the spirit produces good fruit
- c. All roots feed on compost to grow into sturdy healthy plants. The sin roots (pursuit of self or the 1st commandment?) are no different. The compost that feeds your sin roots and spiritual roots is what motivates you. Motivational compost that feeds our sin roots includes:

- i. fear
- ii. love
- iii. pleasure
- iv. power
- v. control
- vi. freedom
- vii. autonomy
- viii. intimacy
- ix. significance
- x. reputation
- xi. respect
- xii. admiration
- xiii. righteousness
- xiv. peace
- xv. happiness
- xvi. comfort
- xvii. success
- xviii. money
- xix. pain

d. *Jerimiah 17:9*

i. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

e. *Matthew 15:18-20*

i. But a what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person.

f. It is crucial that you invite God to expose the eyes of your heart to the reality of your heart. Ask God to show you your sin roots that produce rotten fruit and the motivational compost that feeds the sin roots. Here is how that works.

i. When some stimulus produces grrrrrr....that is a signal that a root of sin is producing rotten fruit. What is that root of sin? For me, my roots of sin are:

1. Selfishness
2. Self-righteousness
3. Self-reliance
4. Judgmental spirit
5. Pride

ii. As soon as my heart begins to grumble with grrrrr....and hopefully before it erupts from my mouth in anger or complaining or self-righteous judgement – I can STOP – and admit my weakness and ask for grace to feed and water my spiritual heart, and deny the roots of sin access to the motivational compost that they need to survive.

iii. Why is this important?

1. Because if you wait until intense suffering, trial, and difficulty radically disrupts and blows up your life – then you will suffer the thing you are suffering in a very hard way. The pain of the suffering will be added to by suffering the reality that your roots of sin, your identity, and things you hold onto are under attack or destroyed.

g. when we suffer our lives are forever changed. When we suffer - the Horizontal things of this world that we trusted in for significance and identity are ripped away and we don't just suffer the loss of the thing, we also suffer the loss of the identity and security it provided

h. physical health, productivity, wealth, friendships, - all of the horizontal things of this world – should produce deep gratitude and thankful worship of Jesus who provided them. But instead we bask in our own glory that says look at all that I did in my own strength or wisdom. And that is a problem.

i. weakness is not what you and I should be afraid of. We should fear our delusion of strength.

j. We also suffer because we have an expectation that life will always be the way it has been – that tomorrow will be the same as today or yesterday – how many times have you heard someone say, or you have said, in the midst of suffering – “I just want to return to the good old days – I just want life to be like it was”? OR ... I never expected this? I cant believe she is dead? I am shocked at what happened?

k. We live in world that has been dramatically damaged by sin. And God is a God of change. He changes us through our suffering to produce in us what we could never produce in ourselves. If you are in a relationship of saving faith in Jesus then your life was forever changed the moment the Holy Spirit invaded you and regenerated your heart to begin to seek after God. And God promises us that he will continue to change us every day that he has sovereignly allotted for us to breath. That is the doctrine of sanctification. The purpose of our sanctification is to be presented to God on the last day and prepared and ready to glorify Him for all eternity. Suffering is part and parcel of sanctification. Paul in *Romans 8:28[†] And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29[†] For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.*

i. The good that Paul speaks to is not a name it and claim it humanistic theology but our sanctification – slowly – one day at a time - being made in the likeness of Christ. **That** is the good. And that process occurs through suffering – when

the horizontal systems and stuff of this world that we believe define our identity are stripped away and blown up – we are left with nothing but the Lord. Is Jesus all you have? Is Jesus all you need? Is Jesus your identity?

- l. Suffering and the change it brings is fearful. But Scripture works to prepare us not to live in fear but to be ready for the things that we will face. God gives us everything we need – grace, truth of His Word, promises that He alone is sovereign and will providently provide what we need. Therefore God’s Word calls His people – to face difficulty not with shock, fear, and panic – but to experience it with faith, calm, and confidence. Calm? The opposite of calm is shock and panic. **1 Peter 4:12 “Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to rest you, as though something strange were happening to you”**. Shock and panic is the normative response to suffering when we are surprised – unexpectant – caught off guard – unprepared – and untrained how to respond. Be prepared church by knowing your heart sin roots, motivational compost, and the rotten fruit that reveals the true nature of your identity. Be prepared to change.
- m. **Your suffering is more powerfully shaped by what is in your heart than by what is in your body or in the world around you.** Suffering is real, exceedingly difficult, and hard but the harsh realities of the travail you are in are shaped by your thoughts, desires, dreams, expectations, cravings, fears, and assumptions of your heart. Your heart is different than mine. Your roots of sin and motivational compost is different than the person next to you. **Your suffering is more powerfully shaped by what is in your heart than by what is in your body or in the world around you**
- n. Know your heart and as Prov 4:23 instructs us “ keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life”
- o. **What do you – what does your heart – bring to suffering? It can bring:**
 - i. **Poor theology – God wasn’t in this...He had nothing to do with it**
 - ii. **Doubt of God – God cannot be good. I will forever be angry with God and blame him for what happened. I will never trust God.**

- iii. Unrealistic expectations of life – American Dream, pursuit of happiness
- iv. Unrealistic expectations of others – expecting them to worship us
- v. Pride – everything is all about me
- vi. Materialism – whoever has the most toys wins
- vii. Selfism – pursuit of my own interest to the exclusion of anything or anyone

p. What do we need? - **Turn to 2 Cor 12:7-10**

- i. 7[†] So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the **surpassing greatness of the revelations**, [1] a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9[†] But he said to me, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, **I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.** For when I am weak, then I am strong.

SUFFER

SUFFERING

q.

- i. know your heart
- ii. know your roots of sin
- iii. know the motivational compost that feeds your roots of sin
- iv. admit your weakness to others and God, pray for grace to flood into the weakness, - where I am weak God is strong

2. Paul David Tripp's book "Suffering" **identifies 6 traps and 6 comforts that are crucial to us during our vocation of suffering**

i. **The Traps of**

1. Awareness
2. Fear
3. Envy
4. Doubt
5. Denial
6. Discouragement

ii. The Comforts of

1. God's grace
2. God's presence
3. God's Sovereignty
4. God's purpose
5. God's people
6. A heart at rest

3. **Awareness Trap** – suffering always includes spiritual warfare. Why? because when we are deeply suffering – the loss of our idols – the things that bring us our identity- when they are forever removed – it creates intense pain – pain that is heaped up on top of the thing we are suffering. And this catches most people by surprise. **Most people do not understand or realize that suffering always includes spiritual warfare.** And that is what you always must be aware of during times of suffering.

- a. **Suffering is spiritual warfare – when we suffer you must wage strategic war against the thing you are suffering but also battle for your heart – and be amazed at the ways Jesus meets you in the battle**
- b. Suffering always makes us vulnerable in places we thought we were strong
 - i. Make a list of the areas of your life where you think you are control, or strong, or that would bring pain and anguish if they were removed –
 - ii. that list represents your highest vulnerability potential, and helps us...
- c. To walk through the valley of suffering because we understand the potential traps we will face and helps us to embrace the truths of God's comforts.
- d. So we must be aware that suffering always includes spiritual warfare – the battle for our heart. Let's look at the some of the other traps.

4. Fear Trap

- a. **The reality is that spiritual warfare is mundane, normal Christian activity because our hearts are always a battleground between**
 - i. **fear and faith**
 - ii. **doubt and hope**
 - iii. **what is true and what is false**
- b. The new reality of the thing you are suffering begins to control your mediations

- c. The more you meditate on the difficulty, the larger it becomes in your heart, fear balloons and controls the brain, and God seemingly shrinks in size, power, sovereignty, goodness Tell the story of Bart being fired and my response.
- d. The reality that starts to sink in is that you are weak, not in control, and not independent
- e. Fear becomes your new lens and guide – fear is a good thing in the face of danger but it makes a cruel god – it distorts your vision and troubles your own trouble – you have got to fight to see life with eyes of faith
- f. Fear is only defeated by the greater fear – the fear of God –
 - i. fear of created things is always a tempting trap to any sufferer
 - ii. fear of God does not remove suffering from life but dramatically changes the way you suffer. Why?
 - iii. the math is not me compared against the size of my trial but God compared to it
 - 1. God understands what we do not understand
 - 2. He controls what we cannot control
 - 3. He has power where we have no power
 - 4. He gives what we could never earn
 - 5. He is ever-present, ever loving, and eternally gracious
 - 6. And he is prepared to unleash his power and his grace into your weakness and time of need When you give up your delusion of strength, power, control, self-righteousness, self-reliance, and self-worth that is defined by your stuff/toys/material garbage He promises to measure out grace sufficient for the moment and day.
- g. Fear is temporary – God’s loving care is eternal
 - i. Nothing you or I fear in this broken world is eternal – it will not last forever – suffering will not last forever
 - ii. God is eternal – his presence will be w us forever – his gift of grace will never be used up or wear out
 - iii. Suffering will never determine your destiny - God does
- h. Response - Fear always accompanies suffering but it does not have to rule our hearts, define our identity or decimate our hope. God is with us and for us and he delights in unleashing his power and grace for His little children.

5. Envy Trap –

- a. Envy lies – never tells the truth – when you are tempted in your suffering to look around and calculate at how others lives are better than yours, you must determine to lift up your eyes to Jesus and celebrate that He has you in His grip and find reasons to praise. You must preach the Gospel to yourself every day. Each of you preach to yourself every day. The question is what are you preaching? Preach the truth of the Gospel to yourself every day.

6. The Doubt Trap – when you quit believing God is good

- a. doubt ≠ trust .. if we doubt the goodness of God then we will not trust him and will not turn to Him
- b. Two kinds of Doubt
 - i. Doubt of wonderment
 1. God will exercise his power to deliver not what we want but what he knows we need, and he will do it on his timetable not ours – he will not invite us into his sovereignty or his secret will. Because of this, at street level, the life of faith is always struggle of trust. If the doubt of wonderment causes you to come to God asking sincere questions, then asking is an act of faith. The Psalms – particularly Psalm 88 - are filled with real life struggles of faith lived out and the hard questions asked during very hard times.
 - ii. Doubt of judgement
 1. Is when we bring God into the court of our judgement and determine that he is unfaithful, unloving or uncaring – and when we do that – we do not trust God and do not believe He is good, faithful, loving – and we begin to have a major theological shift – many times without realizing we have done so – and the result – our hope is destroyed. The eternal hope we have held onto becomes an empty promise. We are left with no hope. No purpose in life. And in our misery – we blame God – we hold a trial in our head and heart and judge God guilty of failing to be who He says He is and His promises are rubbish and lies. When that happens we are in a very bad place – making the thing we are suffering even more difficult

2. This is one of the enemy's most powerful weapons – to sow seeds of doubt

a. 1 Peter 5:9 “resist the Devil, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”

b. Peter understands that in your suffering the devil is whispering to you:

- i. Where is your God now?
- ii. Why have you been singled out?
- iii. Why do others have it easier?
- iv. Why isn't God listening to your prayers?
- v. Maybe God doesn't really love you?

iii. Your battle is not just the difficult thing you are facing, but the impact of the difficulty on your heart. Here are a few daily strategies to help battle doubt:

1. Fight the devil's lies by paying attention to your private conversations
2. Count your blessings - keep a running list – start w **Eph 1:1-17 (18 - blessings!!!)**
3. Daily confess your struggle to believe – run to God
4. Dive into the deep end of a God focused, gospel-centered pool – pursue God w a new passion
 - a. Pray – for others and yourself
 - b. Read the Word
 - c. Participate in the fabric of the church, worship, LG,
 - d. Disciple others – listen to their struggles – Encourage others!!
 - e. Allow yourself to be an object of grace allows others to practice grace and mercy towards you – AND JOYFULLY LET THEM!!!
 - f. Do not waste the thing you are suffering!

7. The Denial Trap

- a. Biblical faith never asks you to minimize your suffering – to put on a happy face, put on your big girl britches or man up – biblical faith does call us to be honest and admit our weakness and where we are doing spiritual warfare – where is the enemy attacking – what are the lies the devil is whispering in your ears?

- b. If you have to deny your difficulty to obtain a temporary peace, then you may obtain a temporary peace, but you not exercising biblical faith
 - c. ***Hebrews 4:14-16 “since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”***
 - i. Jesus is your advocate and because he is our advocate we have a reason to stand strong – hold on to your confession – preach the Gospel to yourself everyday
 - ii. Suffering exposes weakness that has always been there in our life and confirms how little in life we actually control – we are needy and dependent – God intended us to depend upon Him for everything! Jesus sympathizes with our weakness and neediness – he knows what we are going through and he has more than sufficient grace to flow into your weakness and neediness –
 - iii. Because Jesus walked in your shoes you are free to be weak and to cry out in weakness and you are free from ever having to put on a spiritual act
8. The last trap is the trap of Discouragement
- a. **The spiritual war that rages in the heart of every sufferer is a battle for the control of your heart**
 - b. Whatever functionally rules your heart will shape the way you see life and your desires, and it will control your words and behavior
 - c. Fear is normative for us frail humans but it is dangerous and damaging when it rules your heart
 - d. Left unchecked, discouragement will become your eyes and ears, determining what you see and hear and how you see and hear it.
 - e. Unchecked, discouragement will become the master or your emotions and ruler of your choices and actions.
 - f. Unchecked, discouragement will rob you of your hope and motivation
 - g. Unchecked, discouragement will steal your reason for doing good things

- h. Unchecked, discouragement will make you closed, self-protective, and easily overwhelmed.
- i. Unchecked, discouragement will sap you of your strength and courage
- j. Unchecked, discouragement will cause you to see negative where nothing is negative and miss the positive that is right in front of you
- k. Unchecked, discouragement will tell you lies that have the power to destroy your life
- l. Discouragement is natural for the sufferer but it makes a very, very bad master
- m. Deut 1:19-33 tells the story of unchecked, viral discouragement and fear that prevented the Israelites from moving into the promised land after they learned of the well fortified cities and giants that inhabited the land.

n. Turn to 2 Chron 20 We will all face “enemies” bigger than we are and wonder why a good God would bring things into our lives that don’t seem good at all

- o. allowing discouragement to take root in your heart is super dangerous
 - i. chronically discouraged people find more things wrong than right. they are complainers and whiners. Always pointing out others flaws, injustice in the world, trouble, hate, anger, rejection, and the darkness of sin. Complaining becomes your default language.
 - ii. If discouragement has led you to a place where you complain more than praise then it is VERY important that you DO NOT assume the accuracy and logic of your perspective on life. If complaint has the power to focus your vision, it can also twist and bend your perception of reality and the God who rules. **1 Sam 13-27** graphically demonstrates how discouragement and complaint distorted King Saul’s perception of reality and contributed to his downfall.
 - iii. Every sufferer needs to have their assumptions about life lovingly challenged by the truths of Scripture and the loving corrections of the body of Christ
 - iv. We will NEVER get the help we need if we first demand that people sign on to our view of things before we are willing to open up to them and listen to what they have to say
 - v. In the middle of your suffering there are ways in which you may no longer see life, others, yourself, or God as clearly as you think you do.
 - vi. Selfishness and self-righteousness of sin make us think that we are entitled and deserving. When we don’t get what we think we deserve then we complain and

in our discouragement our relationship with God suffers too. We may still ascend to the truths of the Gospel but functionally we have stopped trusting God and his commands, holiness, justness, righteousness, goodness, and faithfulness.

- vii. A life of courageous obedience is always rooted in a heart that trusts God, admits our weakness, and asks for grace and power to fill the weakness
- viii. Defeating discouragement and complaint is won by constant praise and acknowledging the many blessings God has poured upon us, and asking for his grace and power

9. Let's look at a few truths around the **Comfort** of God's Grace, Presence, Sovereignty, Purpose, People, and a Heart at Rest

- a. The Comfort of God's Grace begins with us fighting for our identity in the midst of trials.
- b. The thing that you are battling is NOT your identity – it may be a temporary address or vocation this side of heaven that is overwhelming – but you must NEVER let it define you. If the thing you are battling – like, “I am depressed” or “I have cancer” becomes your identity then in your personal life and relationships you will live out what that identity means. RIGHT now – what is your identity?
- c. If you have a saving faithful relationship with Jesus then you are a child of God, the daughter or son of The King! And that is your identity!! Preach that to yourself everyday.
- d. Romans 8:18-39 speaks to Uncomfortable Grace – God's grace often does its brightest and best work when things are the most difficult. God is doing good things in and through us, using the very things that we want relief from as his tool
- e. You are not defined by your suffering. Yes you must work so that your travail doesn't become your identity. The things you suffer are powerful, difficult, life-shaping experiences, but they do not define you. If you are God's child, you carry the full meaning of that identity with you no matter how hard life is and no matter how weak you feel. Your identity is not the result of your circumstances or your achievements – it is a gift of God's grace. You didn't earn it and there is nothing you can do lose it. And the good news is that the supply of God's grace will never, ever wear out.

10. The Comfort of God's Presence

- a. The epicenter of Biblical theology is the story of God coming to dwell with his people and unleashing his glory for their good. God is limitless in power, sovereign over all, has authority over everything, is perfect in every way, He dwells with us and in us, and He assures us He is not leaving.
- b. We were wired to get our identity vertically – from and with God – because the things we look to horizontally will never deliver to us the security of identity that find in the presence and grace of God.
- c. Our hope is NOT found in understanding WHY God allowed suffering into our lives. In fact, God never answers Job’s question of WHY. And He likely will not answer yours either. Our hope is not found in the belief that somehow we will tough our way through. Our hope is not found in doctors, lawyers, pastors, family, or friends. Our hope is not found in our resiliency or ingenuity. Our hope is not found in ideas or money, buying stuff, toys, and things. Though we may look to all of those for temporary help, ultimately our hope rests in the faithful and gracious presence of the Lord with us. God may not answer your prayers to be delivered from the suffering, but promises that he will deliver us through the suffering by walking with us and being there with us by measuring out His grace and power sufficient for the moment.
- d. 2 promises God delivers to his children
 - i. Mt 28:20 “and behold, I am always with you”
 1. Your Lord and Savior, in all his power and glory, in the full expression of his mercy and grace and with your welfare in mind, is always with you because you are the place where he now lives. God’s presence is not just your hope; it is your identity as a child of God. There is no better hope for a sufferer. All that God is, he is for us, because he lives inside of us. You are the temple that he resides in. He is always with you.
AND...
 - ii. Joshua 1:5 “I will not leave you or forsake you”
 1. Every time that God’s children face something hard, new, difficult, or overwhelming, God greets you with this promise.
 2. God never calls you to a task, sends you to a new destination, or leads you into difficulty and then abandons you.

3. Suffering brings you to the end of yourself. It exposes and confronts us with our weakness, our delusion of strength and control, and self-righteousness, and forces us to understand that tomorrow will never be like yesterday.
4. That is why it is so critically important to remember that God is faithful and will always be with you and will never forsake you. He will always love you perfectly and will never run away. Even when you are unfaithful, exhausted, hungry, in pain, confused, afraid, disobedient, questioning his wisdom, and trying to run from him and embrace the horizontal stuff of this world to find relief and comfort...He remains faithful

11. The Comfort of God's Sovereignty

- a. I ascribe, ascend to, announce, and believe in the doctrine of the sovereignty of God but functionally, in many ways, I am a self-sovereign. In many ways my comfort is found in convincing myself that I have more control over people, places, and things than I actually have.
- b. We all live in moments of, locations, situations, or relationships that seem to be spinning out of control, but they are not out of control. Yes they are way beyond the scope of our control but they are under the rule of One who is not only in complete control but is also perfectly good in every way. **By the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is your Father by faith in Jesus. Jesus exercises his sovereignty with a father's love for you. He hears your cries for help, and he stays near, and he is always reachable. He has authority you will never have, and he exercises it with a wise and loving heart for your benefit and the benefit of his children.**

12. The Comfort of God's Purpose

- a. Why? Why me? Why now?
- b. While God will not reveal the details of his sovereign purpose and will, we do have scriptural truths that specifically speak to the purpose of our suffering
 - i. **2 Cor 4:7 " we have this treasure (Jesus) in clay jars (us – our fragile bodies), to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us"**
 1. We suffer because we live in a broken world where nothing works as God intended it to work. **God leaves us in this broken world because**

what it produces in us is way better than the comfortable life we all want.

ii. James 1:2-4 “count it all joy my brothers when you face trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”

1. Suffering is the tool that your Savior of wisdom, love, and grace uses to produce wonderful things in and through you that you could never produce on your own. God designs suffering to produce in me what I could never produce on my own. God measures out His grace sufficient for the moment to sustain and nourish you.
2. The greatest disaster in our lives is not what we suffer, but the sin inside of us that separates us from God and always leads to death. While we tend to be intolerant of hardship and difficulty, God is intolerant of our sin, so he uses hard things to deliver us from it. That is called grace. Grace comes in hard, difficult places. And it is not the grace of release – it is the grace of rescue and transformation.
 - a. Suffering has the power to destroy our self-reliance
 - b. Suffering has the power to expose our self-righteousness
 - c. Suffering has the power to expose and blow up our idols – those things that we grasp and hold tightly too – rather than sharing with an open hand and acknowledging that they are temporary blessings and gifts from God
 - i. I am convinced that the very thing you hold onto and fail to give thanks to God for the gift – he will take away
3. God is not content to dispense temporary relief, when eternal change is what we really need. In the zeal of redeeming love, our Lord uses hard tools to produce soft and sturdy hearts – and that is a very good thing!

13. The Comfort of God’s People

- a. Suffering is a messenger telling us that to be human is to be dependent – on God for every heartbeat, breath, and life – and dependent upon others.

- b. God's church is the body of Christ who make his invisible grace visible by sending his people of grace to give grace to people who need grace. **God intends you to be instruments of grace to those who need grace the most.**
- c. How can we – the body of Christ – his servants – be instruments of grace to those who suffer?
 - i. **Greet** the sufferer where they are – don't run from the door – go and answer and warmly welcome them in – Greet their fear, discouragement, questions, and complaints – with a rapt listening ear, a mouth slow to speak, - realizing that unless you have walked in that person's shoes, you have little to say. Do NOT be Job's friends!
 - ii. Dispense **patient grace**
 - iii. **Preach the gospel** when you hear the sufferer exposing unbiblical thinking
 - iv. **Live out the gospel before others**
 - v. **Stand as a rich blessing of mercy**
 - vi. **Always be ready to serve – do not be too busy – keep soft spots on your schedule so that you can be the Lord's instrument of grace**
 - vii. **Never be irritated when they are weak**
 - viii. **Don't push them to get their act together but lovingly point out Gospel truth, the reality of living in a broken world, God's purpose in suffering to produce in us an unwavering faith and dependence upon him rather than the stuff and people of this world**
 - ix. **Be prepared to complicate your life to give others what they need**
 - x. **Make it easy for the sufferer to confess things that are really hard to confess**
 - xi. **Be willing to receive what can be hard to receive – truth of exposed weakness and sin**

d. When you suffer, determine to:

- i. **Be Honest**
- ii. **Let people into your private conversation** – what are you preaching to yourself today? Do not take offense when they fail to agree with your assessment!
- iii. **Admit your weakness** – your biggest danger is not your admission of weakness but your delusion of strength

- iv. **Confess your spiritual blindness** – where is sin blinding you, painting a false picture and deceiving you? Allow others WHO are mature in their faith in the Word, and who know you very well to speak the truth of who you are and what they see in how you are responding to suffering. Let them be instruments of grace and transformation in the hands of the redeemer.
- v. **Seek wise counsel from mature believers who rightly handle the Word of God**
- vi. **Remember – suffering belongs to the Lord. He will take hard and difficult things in your life and use them to produce good things in you that you could never produce, AND, use them to produce good things in the lives of others**
- vii. **Do not waste your suffering**

14. The Comfort of a Heart at Rest

- a. During our lives – regardless if we are in the valley of suffering or on the mountain of ease - The one thing that will bring peace, joy, rest, and lasting satisfaction to your heart that nothing and no one can take away is not a thing. It is a person. The Lord Jesus himself, who enters your life by grace and who will never ever go away. When you find your hope and satisfaction in Jesus, and not in people, possessions, money, success, or physical health, no pain or loss can take that satisfaction away. When you truly place your hope in Jesus, nothing is able to plunder your hope. When Jesus holds your identity, nothing in life is able to rob you of meaning, purpose, or potential. Jesus presence, power, and grace change everything.
- b. The comfort for every sufferer is hope. Hope is a person and his name is Jesus. Life is a person called Emmanuel that means God with us. God enters your life by grace and by grace makes you the place where he dwells.

15. Eternal glory awaits the faithful in Christ Jesus in a heaven of no sin. This side of heaven God promises us that we will suffer, that it is for our good, required in the sanctification process, and that suffering will purify our faith and identify in Christ alone by stripping away all other idols, and in so doing preparing us for eternal glory that awaits us on the last day of history.

16. Do you know Jesus? Do you have a life-saving relationship with Jesus? If you do not then do not tarry....do not wait....start now by asking others who are mature Christians to help you understand who Jesus is.

Your Action Items

- Examine your heart. Pray for God to reveal the true nature of your heart
- List your sin roots and your motivational compost
- Where is Jesus not your identity

Closing Prayer

Father if there is someone within the reach of my word that has not repented of their sin and trusted Jesus with their life, then do not tarry and send your Spirit to quicken their heart with an acute sin sickness and horrible gut wrenching realization that they are doomed for destruction apart from you. Weave your web of grace and mercy that moves the right people and the right time to speak your truth into their lives. Let their hearts desire be the continuous pursuit of your holy, holy, holy name and Word. In Jesus name we pray amen.