

Resilience: Finding Hope in Suffering

Live with Jesus in Worship

"I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching I with my tears. My vision is blurred by grief," Psalm 6:6.

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah looked into the future and saw that God's chosen savior would be "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," (Is 53:3). Truly, as Jesus lived among us, he walked through every form of painful suffering: poverty, genocide, oppression, racism, loss, rejection, betrayal, hunger, homelessness, humiliation, torture, and death. Through it all he remained beautifully attuned to his calling, to the needs of others, and to his relationship with his Father. As dark as life became for him, he didn't lose hope; the darkness never overcame his light (John 1:5).

Jesus warns us that we will walk through similar sorrows: "A disciple is not above his teacher" (Matthew 10:24), he says, and "In this world you will have trouble," (John 16:33).

The prayer Jesus gives us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," (Matthew 6:10), reminds us that at present all is *not* as God desires. The Bible even speaks of death as Jesus' (and our) enemy, one that Jesus will destroy at the end of this age: "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death," (1 Corinthians 15:25-26).

In the meantime, Jesus's warning lets us know that we will suffer in a world fallen away from God's reign. We suffer the common agonies of death, sickness, and accidents. We suffer from things people do to us and things we do to ourselves—abuse, neglect, slander, betrayal, oppression, war, abandonment, addiction, and broken relationships. And we who follow Jesus also suffer as we follow him—when we wrestle against temptation and when others persecute, malign, or reject us.

When suffering strikes, we can mistakenly believe that God is punishing us for something we have done wrong. Conversely, we might believe God has done something wrong—grievously failing to keep his promises to us. This can be calamitous to our faith. If we have this worldview, when suffering inevitably finds us, we will *lose heart* (2 Corinthians 4:16).

But Jesus speaks to this too. He follows his statement, "In this world you will have trouble," with this encouragement, "But take heart; I have overcome the world," (John 16:33). He wants us to know that though we will have trouble, we do not have to lose heart. The darkness does not have to quench our light and hope.

Paul speaks to his experience of this: "We rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, 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, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us," Romans 8:3-5.

What this points to is that there is a path through suffering that deepens our character, unites us more closely with Jesus, forms hope in us, and leads us into deeper experiences of God's love. We walk this path with Jesus by engaging in wise and healthy practices that help us, through the grace of God's Holy Spirit, to not lose heart.

THE PRACTICE

"It is therefore not true that we become less through loss—unless we allow the loss to make us less, grinding our soul down until there is nothing left but an external self entirely under the control of circumstances. Loss can also make us more. In the darkness we can still find the light. In death we can also find life. It depends on the choices we make," Jerry Sittser.

The following practices can guide us through suffering to hope and deepening love:

- I will resist the power of pain to disillusion me.
- I will say, "I am hurting."
- I will choose to mourn.
- I will say, "I need others."
- I will walk with God.
- I will take my thoughts captive.
- I will be aware of the lure of addiction.
- I will practice *Examen*.

I will resist the power of pain to disillusion me.

God has not promised anyone exemption from the sorrows and suffering of life. He says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you," Isaiah 43:2. And Jesus promises, "You will have trouble" (John 16:33).

Peter encourages his church similarly, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you . . . as though something strange were happening to you. . . the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world," (1 Peter 4:12, 5:9).

And Paul says, "we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings," (2 Corinthians 1:5).

The Psalms of lament express the cries of God's people throughout the ages and the cries of Jesus himself. Please see Psalm 6, 13, 22, 42, and 77 as examples. Praying such psalms can help

us to understand that our suffering does not place us outside of God's story and to give voice to our sorrow.

We can also resist disillusionment as we meditate on the life of Jesus—where Jesus shared with us every imaginable form of suffering. We can receive his empathy and compassion for us. And we can remember the suffering of our brothers and sisters the world over to remind ourselves of our common humanity and to keep ourselves from feeling outcast or singled out for anguish.

Lastly, we must remember that because of the cross a time is coming when God will “wipe away every tear from our eyes” and there will be no “death, mourning, or crying anymore,” (Revelation 21:4). We are created for a life free of suffering, and because of the life we share with Jesus, we will one day be with him where all tears will be forgotten. This is why Paul calls our afflictions “momentary,” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

I will say, “I am hurting.”

The psalms of lament model for us how to process our pain—by praying it to God. Honesty is crucial to deepening hope and love when we suffer. In his compassion, God has even given us words for our groanings. He knows what it feels like to be in pain:

“I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears,” Psalm 6:6

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” Psalm 13:1

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 22:1

“My soul clings to the dust,” Psalm 119:25.

“I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint,” Psalm 22:14.

We can choose psalms that express our lament and pray them over and over if need be. Please see Psalms 10, 13, 22, 42, 74, 77 for examples.

We can also write our own laments, following the pattern of the psalms.

I will choose to mourn.

Jerry Sittser explains that while grief is the uncontrollable emotion we feel about loss, mourning is something we choose to do. To choose to mourn is to create rituals that help us both face and find comfort in our grief. Mourning might include displaying photographs of lost loved ones, commemorating in an annual way the anniversaries of our losses, or acknowledging the birthdays of those we have lost. Attending a church service designed for those who are grieving is a way to choose to mourn. We might also create rituals that help us remember the good things about those we have lost—visiting places they loved, listening to songs that remind us of them, or cooking their favorite recipes with friends.

I will say, “I need others.”

God created us to be a communal people, one in his body. We need each other, perhaps never more so than when we suffer. As Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together," (1 Corinthians 12:26), and "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep," (Romans 12:15).

To process our pain in a healthy way, we must allow others to care for us. This might include a close circle of friends, our family, a small group, a therapist, and/or a spiritual director.

When others attune to our pain, it lessens. It's as if they share the load with us.

Likewise, when we come alongside someone who is hurting, we need to understand that feeling their pain with them is the best thing we can do. They likely don't want wise words, advice, or for us to make sense of their troubles for them; they want to know they aren't alone and that others know what they are feeling and experiencing.

This story is a good description of this reality:

The View from a Hearse:

"I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealing, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly; he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except to wish he'd go away. He finally did.

Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour or more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left.

I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go." –Joe Bayly

I will walk with God.

God promises to be with us when we go through trials: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned," (Isaiah 43:1-2).

We practice being with him in order to become more aware of his presence. He longs for our love, but he will not force it.

We can walk with him in humble love by continuing to attend worship at our church. Jerry Sittser, who lost his daughter, wife, and mother in one tragic car accident, explains that for five years he could not sing in church, but he would attend and let the congregation, the friends around him, worship for him. He rested and wept in their worship.

Walking with God also means daily rhythms of talking with him, being with him, and reading or hearing his words of Scripture. Pre-made prayers such as the psalms, the Lord's prayer, or liturgical prayers can help us pray when we can't find words. One meaningful verse on a notecard may be all we can handle, but God can speak through one verse.

Tim Keller puts it this way: “Walking with God through suffering means *treating God as there*, as present. Walking is something nondramatic, rhythmic—A walk is day in and day out praying; day in and day out Bible and Psalms reading; day in and day out obeying, talking to Christian friends, and going to corporate worship, committing yourself to fully participating in the life of a church. It is rhythmic, on and on and on,” *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*.

I will take my thoughts captive.

Anxiety and pain can drag our thoughts into visions of terrible futures that seem inevitable. When we catch ourselves playing out these painful scenarios, we can bring our thoughts back to the present moment and to the promises of God.

Paul says, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ,” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

We can keep any promise from his word God has highlighted for us near at hand to help redirect our painful thoughts.

I will be aware of the lure of addiction.

When we hurt, we long for something to ease the pain—alcohol, pornography, shopping, television, or endless online scrolling can seem to do the trick. But numbing our pain this way delays and obstructs our healing.

Jerry Sittser says, “The quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise.” To resist addiction, then, we must be willing to face our pain, to “plunge into the darkness” with the help of those who love us.

I will practice *Examen*.

Suffering can be a season of heightened sight. We become like gold being refined in a fire—the dross floating to the surface. We might become aware of negative views we hold of ourselves, deeply hidden resentments toward God or others, or addictions that we have not addressed. It can be a season of asking questions such as, “What frailties are exposed in me through this? Do I tend to blame God? Blame myself? Do I numb-out? Do I rage? Whom do I need to forgive?”

At the same time, what is good and true and beautiful can also become more clear. The love of a friend may mean more than ever. Moments of peace and laughter seem sweeter. God’s word might leap out at us in a way that touches us like never before. We might receive a moment of joy like a baby bird receiving a droplet of nourishment.

The practice of *examen* can help us process pain by intentionally noticing these insights into ourselves and God's movements in our lives.

In this practice, we intentionally go back over the past day or week to watch for evidence of God's presence. And we invite God to search our hearts, to help us see the ways he wants to invite us to grow.

An outline of an examen prayer is attached to this practice.

These practices can help us grow through suffering, becoming people of hope and deep love. Please don't feel pressure to try them all at once. Please just consider, where do you feel drawn to engage with these practices? Is there a step you can take this week?

If you are suffering today and need support, please don't hesitate to reach out to anyone on staff at Greenwood.

SCRIPTURES

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart; I have overcome the world." John 16:33

"So 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." 2 Corinthians 4:16-17

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." 1 Peter 4:12

"The troubles we experienced were a great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God." 2 Corinthians 1:8-9

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." Psalms 23:4

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. . . Do not be afraid, for I am with you." Isaiah 43:2-3, 5

"The God of all grace . . . after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong." 1 Peter 5:10

"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.” 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.” Revelation 21:4

QUOTES

“The experience of loss does not have to be the defining moment in our lives. Instead, the defining moment can be our response to the loss. It is not what happens to us that matters so much as what happens in us,” Jerry Sittser.

“Walking with God through suffering means *treating God as there*, as present. Walking is something nondramatic, rhythmic—A walk is day in and day out praying; day in and day out Bible and Psalms reading; day in and day out obeying, talking to Christian friends, and going to corporate worship, committing yourself to fully participating in the life of a church. It is rhythmic, on and on and on,” Tim Keller.

“I did not get over the loss of my loved ones; rather, I absorbed the loss into my life, like soil receives decaying matter, until it became a part of who I am. Sorrow took up permanent residence in my soul and enlarged it,” Jerry Sittser.

“When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine,” John Rippon.

“The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His,” George Macdonald.

“I know there is poor and hideous suffering, and I've seen the hungry and the guns that go to war. I have lived pain, and my life can tell: I only deepen the wound of the world when I neglect to give thanks for early light dappled through leaves and the heavy perfume of wild roses in early July and the song of crickets on humid nights and the rivers that run and the stars that rise and the rain that falls and all the good things that a good God gives,” Ann Voskamp.

Additional Resources:

The Prayer of Examen practice.

Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, Tim Keller

One Thousand Gifts, Ann Voskamp

A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss, Gerald Sittser.

Every Moment Holy, Vol. 2: Death, Grief, and Hope, Douglas McKelvey.

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

Before you engage with this practice:

1. Please share about a season of trouble or suffering in your life. What was most helpful to you in this season? What seemed to make things more difficult for you?
2. Are you in a season of suffering now? Are you willing to share about this with your small group?
3. As you read the eight practices that can help us find hope in suffering, what stands out to you? Is there one you feel drawn to grow in?
4. If you are in a carefree season, please consider, is there someone going through a hard time you feel prompted to reach out to? Do you see a way to gently encourage them in one or more of the practices? (Offer to sit with them in church or to take them to coffee just to listen, for example?)

After you engage with this practice:

1. What did you find helpful in this practice? What did you find challenging?
2. What do you believe you are learning about suffering?
3. How does Jesus' suffering inform your experiences of suffering?
4. How can the hope of eternal life give you strength when you suffer? Are there practices that help you be in touch with this hope?
5. How are you or how do you need to experience God's love in a deeper way?