

Courage to Face Suffering

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. We are continuing this week looking at some themes that we started looking at last week, and these are themes that concern suffering and how we deal with suffering.

You guys let me know, is that me or you? We don't know. It's me. All right, well, I'm going to do the best I can here. Just let me know if I need to use a handheld.

But we're going to continue some themes that we started last week looking at suffering and how we deal with suffering. In our culture, you know, different cultures are influenced by different forces, and that kind of shapes how we deal with things like suffering. And in our culture, our approach to suffering has been shaped a lot by the Enlightenment in a couple of different ways.

On the one hand, the Enlightenment has given us as a society tremendous scientific and technological and economic and political resources that mean we have been able to alleviate a great deal of suffering. Stephen Pinker at Harvard has written a book called Enlightenment Now, and he says based on his research just based on the numbers alone, by almost every metric of human well-being, the world is getting better at a significant rate. So things like war and violence and poverty are declining, believe it or not. It doesn't feel like that at the moment. Health, wealth, happiness, and equality are all improving globally. So he says, you know, since the Enlightenment, we've had this profound development. Lots of suffering has been alleviated. So on the one hand, we've gained that. But on the other hand, the Enlightenment paved the way for a modern secular worldview that says the material world is all there is, and that life is about getting as much happiness as we can while we can. And this worldview has absolutely nothing to offer people who are suffering. It has absolutely nothing to say to people who are suffering. It offers no explanation for suffering, no deeper meaning to suffering. It offers very little guidance on how to deal with suffering. In fact, sociologists and anthropologists have looked at various cultures, both ancient and modern, and compared how they prepare their members to face and deal with suffering. And many have concluded that our late modern Western society is one of the worst at preparing people to face suffering. So to put all of this another way, in our culture, we have gained tremendous scientific, technological, and economic resources to deal with suffering, but we have lost our spiritual resources for dealing with suffering. And those are far, far, far more important. And so what you find is that a secular person in our society has to look elsewhere for resources. And there is no better place to look than the Christian gospel. And so that's what we're doing in this series, and that's what we're going to do this morning. We're going to look at 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 16 through chapter 5 verse 10 to see how Paul faced suffering in his own life. And what we see Paul doing here is drawing on the resources of the gospel. The gospel offers us all of these things, and Paul is drawing from the gospel, and that is shaping and changing how he interacts with adversity in his life. So the question this morning, how does the gospel give us true courage to face and endure suffering? It offers us three things. It offers us first realism, the capacity for realism. It then offers us two promises, the promise of resurrection and the promise of homecoming. So let's pray, and then we will open

God's Word. Lord, we thank you for your Word, and we thank you for your Son. We thank you for his death and resurrection, that you're a living God. We thank you for the Holy Spirit who is with us now.

[4 : 28] And we thank you for the Holy Spirit. We thank you for your Son. We thank you for your Son. We thank you that through your Spirit, these words can breathe and come alive and become flesh, and that in the power of your Spirit, we might encounter your Son this morning. And Lord, it is in that hope and in his name that we pray this prayer. Amen. So first of all, the gospel gives us the capacity for realism.

Ernest Becker was a cultural anthropologist who won a Pulitzer Prize for his book, *The Denial of Death*. I've referenced this from time to time if you've been a long-time member of Advent. This was back in the 1970s, and in it he basically makes the case that many, if not all, of our psychological issues and our societal ills stem from our inability to accept the reality of death and dying. That as a society, we have a deep death anxiety, and that causes all kinds of issues. So this is why he would say, for example, our culture that we live in today idealizes youth. We love anything and everything that reminds us of youth, of vitality, of flourishing, and as we age, which like it or not, some of us are aging. In fact, all of us are aging as much as we don't like to think about it. And as we start to show signs of aging, we do a lot to try to cover up the signs that we're aging because we idealize youth. We're not a culture that wants lots of wrinkles and gray hair because that conveys our wisdom and our life experience because we don't value those things in our culture. We value people who look young, smooth skin, luminous, right, as though they just were born last week. This is what we, this is what we like to see. And so the anti-aging industry is a 58.5 billion dollar market.

Anti-aging, as though such a thing were possible. But Paul brings a strong dose of realism in this passage. Chapter 4, verse 16, he says, our outer self is wasting away. Anti-aging market or not, here's the truth. We are wasting away. Second law of thermodynamics, entropy, all things are breaking down, spending more energy than they can replenish. Our bodies are wearing down. Your heart has a finite number of beats before it stops. Our outer self is wasting away. Chapter 5, verse 1, our bodies are like tents.

Now let's not make the mistake of thinking in Gnostic terms that Paul means our true self is inside the tent and the body is just a tent. The emphasis here, based on the context, is on the fragility, the impermanence of this body. Tents are not made to last years and years and years. A tent lasts a little while, but a strong storm comes and it can destroy the tent. And that's what Paul is trying to convey here. Your body is not a fortress, right? It's not a castle that you live in. It's not even a building. Your body is a tent. It's here today, gone tomorrow. A strong breeze could blow it over.

[7 : 51] Tents are fragile and weak. No amount of organic, non-GMO, grass-fed food can change the fact that one day this body is going to be destroyed, right? It might delay it a little longer. There are other great reasons for that kind of diet, but eventually this body, Paul says, is going to be destroyed.

Verse 2, in this tent we groan. Now suffering is not an exception to the norm. In our culture, we think it is. If you suffer, it's an aberration. We need to escape suffering immediately. It means something has gone wrong. But Paul says, no, groaning is life. Life is groaning. Groaning is the norm.

It's a core part of living in tent bodies. No offense to you, but your body is a tent body. And you groan a lot in a tent body. Tent bodies are vulnerable to pain and fatigue and illness and pandemics. Depression and mental illness and anxiety and grief and loneliness.

You know, we have such an aversion to these things in our culture, right? Something stirs negative emotions and we say, that's triggering me. I've got to get away. I was with a therapist a couple of weeks ago and she said, you know, all being triggered means is something is forcing you to feel bad feelings that you don't want to feel. That's being triggered. And I thought that was an interesting thing for a woman who spends a lot of her time working with people who are recovering from trauma to say, right? Paul says, life triggers us constantly. We groan. We feel bad much of the time. And what we need to understand with this first point is real courage is not gained by denying or minimizing the truth of suffering. That's not where real courage comes from. That kind of pie in the sky, escapist optimism, that is not a seedbed for courage. That's denial.

Right? Those are defense mechanisms. The first thing that we need to do is accept the truth of the world that we live in and the bodies that we inhabit and to try to begin to see things as they really are, as Paul did. The gospel is very honest about this. You know, the gospel says because we've sinned and rebelled against God, the world is broken. Our bodies are broken. Everything is breaking down.

[10 : 19] And, you know, we know that even as Christians, we have a tendency to kind of avoid these things and we don't want to think about them. And so actually in the Christian calendar, we have some measures that force us to go against that tendency to think about happy thoughts rather than facing some of these painful realities. So we have an entire service called Ash Wednesday, the entire point of which is simply to focus on our mortality. Right? We had this not too long ago.

You come up and a priest puts ashes on your forehead and says, from dust you have come and to dust you shall return. You know, not long after I was ordained, I led my first Ash Wednesday service

and I had the opportunity to do that for my own children. It was actually one of the most powerful experiences in my pastoral ministry was putting ashes on my kids' foreheads and saying, to dust you shall return. Mortality. We have a season, Lent. We're in it right now. One of the points of Lent is to focus on our finitude, our creatureliness, our mortality. We're doing that right now. Also, as of this year, we have a funeral pre-planning form that is available for you to fill out and file with the church office. This is so that you can make your preferences and wishes known regarding your funeral service so that when you return to dust, your friends and family and pastors and other people who are trying to plan your funeral will know what you would prefer in terms of hymns and texts and all of that stuff. So we have that available. We would love for all of our members to fill it out. Guess how many people filled it out so far? One. And it wasn't me.

These are not things that we like to think about. But we have to. We have to be realistic. So this is the first thing. Realism. But that's not where we stay because then there are two great promises given to us in this text that come from the gospel that anchor us in the midst of this reality, as hard as it might be to bear. The first of these great promises is the promise of resurrection.

One of the reasons that we have such a hard time accepting death is because there is a part in each of us that longs, that knows, that believes deep down that we were made for something more. It's in all of us. You say, religious people? No, everybody. Virtually all civilizations in human history have shared this longing for the eternal.

[13:04] Randy Alcorn wrote a great book on this called *Simply Heaven*. He says, Australian Aborigines pictured heaven as a distant island in the west. The early Finns thought it was a distant island to the east. The Mexicans, Peruvians, and Polynesians believe that we go to the sun or the moon after death. Native Americans believe that in the afterlife their spirits would hunt the spirits of buffalo. The Babylonian Gilgamesh epic refers to a resting place for heroes and it hints at the possibility of a tree of life. In the pyramids of Egypt, the embalmed bodies are given maps which are placed beside them to guide them in the future world. The Romans believed that the righteous would picnic in the Elysian fields as their horses grazed nearby. While the details differ, there is a unifying testimony in the human heart. The unifying testimony of the human heart that we were made for something more. That there is life after death. We carry a primordial memory of eternity in our hearts.

And we know it deep down. We know it. We know it. And the Christian gospel says, in a sense, you're right. There's a reason why you feel that way. There's a reason why at funerals we are angry. Even if you're, you're the person who passed away is your great grandmother who's, you know, 110 years old. At no point do we get to a place where we say, I'm so glad that person died. We may be, might be glad that they, the suffering has ended. We might be thinking, you know, it's, it's time. But that's not the same thing as saying this is good. There's something in our, in our soul that says, why can't we go on living? Why can't this continue? Why do we have to all waste away? The Christian gospel says, you're right.

Although it would say the truth is far better than any of these traditions could have imagined. As Paul says in verses 1 through 4 of chapter 5, even though this body is a tent and will one day be destroyed, one day God will raise us from death and give us new bodies. These will not be tent bodies. These will be buildings. These will be, in other words, bodies that are built to last, built to last for eternity. These new bodies will not be subject to decay. They will not get sick.

They will not have chronic issues. They will not be so depressed that they can't get out of bed in the morning. These will be physical bodies without the physical limitations that we experience now.

[15:52] And Paul says that he longs for this body so that he will not be found naked. Being naked means bodiless. And what this is saying is human beings are not meant to be bodiless. We're not meant to exist in a disembodied state. Now this is extremely important. This is extremely important. You know, I preached on the resurrection of the body not too long ago at a funeral and a woman came up to me afterwards and said, I really enjoyed that. I've grown up going to church my whole life. I've been a Christian as long as I can remember, but I've never heard that. And I said, what have you never heard? And she said, well, all the funerals I've ever been to, they talk a lot about heaven, but I've never heard anybody talk about our bodies being raised. You know, there's a strong strain of thinking in Christianity that focuses on heaven. There are movies where people claim to have seen and experienced heaven. Now I'm not saying there's no such a thing as heaven, but what I am saying is that the Bible doesn't say a whole lot about heaven. There seems to be some intermediate state that we enter into upon our death, what Paul would refer to as being

naked, being disembodied, but that is only a result of the fall. God's intent from the beginning is that we would be embodied. We are our bodies, and one day we will have new bodies, building bodies, eternal bodies. That's all of the hope of Scripture. The promise of resurrection is a tremendous resource to help us endure all kinds of suffering. There was a fantastic article in The New Yorker back in December 2020 by a guy named

Vincent Cunningham, and I have to give a nod to Abraham Cho for pointing me toward this article. It's called What Thomas Jefferson Could Never Understand About Jesus. Most of us know about the Jefferson Bible, where Thomas Jefferson took the Bible, and he famously took scissors, and he cut out all of the parts of the Bible that were supernatural, and he wanted to distill and preserve only the pure teachings of Jesus, the kind of pure philosophy of Jesus. He essentially wanted to recreate Jesus in his own image. He wanted to recreate Jesus as a kind of enlightenment era intellectual who would be more palatable to modern audiences. But in the article, Cunningham says that as a result of this, Jefferson's Jesus had very little to offer people like Frederick Douglass or Howard Thurman or Martin Luther King Jr. Here's what he says. He says, Douglas's Jesus is not Socrates. He is, as Douglas wrote, the redeemer, friend, and savior of those who diligently seek him. Douglas did not wish to remove Christ from the Gospels or to separate the New Testament from the Old. Jefferson's Jesus is an admirable sage, fit bedtime reading for seekers of wisdom.

But those who were weak or suffering or in urgent trouble would have to look elsewhere. Jefferson's Bible ends before the resurrection with Jesus crucified by the Roman occupiers as the Gospels tell us he was. Jefferson's, as he was, Jefferson's austere editing turns the killing almost into an afterthought.

For Thurman, and we might add King and Douglas, the crucifixion meant that Christ had radically identified himself with the worst off. These societal castoffs who could never get a break now had a savior, a champion.

[19 : 46] Where death for Jefferson's Jesus is an ending for Thurman's Jesus, it is a necessary precondition, just a start.

In the face of suffering and death, Jefferson's Jesus can only offer platitudes. The risen Jesus makes a promise in the face of death that one day death will be no more, that one day death will die, that the sting of death has already been removed, and one day we will live again with him in building bodies built for eternity. And so the Gospel gives us this courage to face suffering because not only does it ground us in realism, we're wasting away, but then it says, but good news!

The sting of death has been removed, it's no longer something to fear, one day you will live again. And then finally, and arguably most important, the Gospel promises, the second great promise in this text, it promises a great homecoming for all of God's people.

Pat Bailey tells the story of keeping her grandkids, these young boys, so that their mom and dad could go away on a trip. So mom and dad leave, they spend the first day together, it's kind of a rainy Saturday, and then that evening mom and dad call, and some of you who have kids know exactly what I'm going to say.

Mom and dad call, you get away from your kids, and then all you do is talk about your kids. And they call, and they want to connect with their kids, but what this actually produces, after a long, rainy, boring Saturday, is inconsolable crying.

[21 : 39] These kids just want their mom and dad back. They're crying inconsolably. And she says that they hang up the phone, and she's trying to help them feel better, and one of the kids says, Grandma, I'm homesick, but I am home.

How is that possible? The same is true of us. How can we be homesick even when we are home? The thing that we need to realize is, even if we get to the point in our society where we're able to cure all disease, eradicate all injustice and inequality, eliminate all poverty, even if we're able to one day upload our consciousness into computers to escape physical death, which people are working on right now, even if we can do all of that, there will always be suffering.

There will always be suffering. Why? Because there will always be the kind of suffering that exiles feel. Because they're forced to live in a place that is not their home.

The suffering of being in exile. That's what the Bible says this world is. It is a great world, but it is not our home. One day it will be our home, but until that day comes, until Jesus brings the new heavens and the new earth, this world is not our home.

[23 : 00] We are living in exile. This is what C.S. Lewis says in *The Weight of Glory*. Even when we are home, he says, we feel a deep longing for some other greater home.

And he calls this the inconsolable longing. And we mistakenly think that we can satisfy this longing in the right job, or the right lover, or spouse, or going back to nostalgic memories, the kind of golden past that some of us idealize, or our idealist utopian visions of the future, that we think in different ways we can somehow get there.

We mistakenly identify this longing with things in our lives. I think this is what drives people to move to different cities, and to change jobs, and to leave their spouses, and to have affairs, and to leave churches.

And I think a lot of those decisions that people make are partly driven by the sense that maybe I can satisfy this thing if I just make this change. Not so, Lewis would say.

Nothing can satisfy it. He says, what we are doing is we're longing for the scent of a flower that we've not found. We're longing for the echo of a tune that we have not heard. We're longing for news from a country that we've never yet visited.

[24 : 27] And the gospel says the reason that we have this longing is because this world is not our home. It never will be until Jesus comes again. And this is extremely important for determining how we endure suffering.

Because so much of our endurance of suffering depends on the expectations that we have. If you believe, as we said at the very beginning, if you believe that this world is all there is, and that our goal should be to get as much happiness out of life as we can, while we can, when real life hits you, when you begin to realize how much suffering there is in life, and how no matter what, you will never be fully satisfied, when that begins to sink in, your life is not going to make any sense.

And what's so hard is, we all think that we are suffering worse than other people. And that makes us feel so bad. You look over and you're like, this person has everything that I want. They have the life that I want.

And why am I living this life and not that life? If only we knew. If only we knew. The reality. The pervasiveness of suffering.

We wouldn't be as envious. The reality of life is, there's an extraordinary amount of suffering. And if you expect, this is the only life I have, I've got to be as happy as I can be, then when suffering comes, it's going to all fall apart.

[25 : 51] You're going to feel like you're failing in life. This is my one shot at happiness, and I'm screwing it up. It's no wonder we spend so much time and energy self-medicating ourselves and numbing ourselves to avoid having to deal with this.

But the gospel says, we should never expect to be fully satisfied in this life. The gospel says, home is not a place, it's a person. It's Jesus Christ.

Paul says in verse 8, his yearning to be at home with Christ is so strong that he would be willing to forgo having a body if only he could be with Christ. He's like, I'll give my body up. Can I just be with Jesus?

That's how much he longs for it. And yet, in verses 9 and 10, he says, nevertheless, essentially, he says in context, our calling is to serve him faithfully while we're here.

And in context, if you go back to chapter 4, what Paul is talking about is the proclamation of the gospel. He says, the reason that I can't be with Jesus, the reason that I'm living in exile is because I have a purpose in this broken world, and that is to preach the gospel.

[26 : 52] And I'm going to do that faithfully until Jesus brings me home. And what this tells us is very, very important when it comes to suffering. The purpose of life is not the pursuit of happiness.

Thank God when we're happy. Thank God when there's joy. Thank God when we can feast and celebrate. The purpose of life is not to seek happiness. The purpose of life is to pursue the purposes that Jesus Christ has given us to fulfill in the world, to pursue our vocation, the reason that we are here.

And the Bible says, you don't need to seek satisfaction. One day you're going to get it. That's the promise. It's secure. It's there. It's in heaven. It's in the new earth.

It's waiting for you. But the purpose of this life is to serve Jesus. And if you know that this world is not your home, and you know that you're here to serve the purpose that Jesus has given you, then you're going to experience some suffering along the way.

You know, we were on sabbatical, and we were traveling a lot for sabbatical, and we had young kids, including one child who couldn't, when we left, walk yet.

[28 : 06] And so traveling in Europe with young kids is really challenging. And so we kept thinking, this is supposed to be restful and relaxing, and yet this is absolutely, incredibly, insanely difficult.

And we were trying to be thankful for the experience, and yet it was just so hard. And then we sort of had this, we said, you know, we need to reframe this. This is not a vacation. This is not rest.

This is not relaxation. This is a family adventure. And when we reframed it, I'm not even kidding, when we reframed it, a family adventure, our whole attitude changed.

Because in an adventure, you're expecting lots of adversity. That's part of what an adventure is. If you don't have adversity, it's kind of a boring adventure. And so we reframed it, and we started really having a great time, because you know what?

This is an adventure. You know, my child puking in the middle of the Munich airport when we're 10 minutes late to our flight, and having to run like bandits away from the puke, you know, that's, no, that's not, we're not happy, but that's the kind of thing that happens on an adventure.

[29 : 07] Right? And in the same way, if we think of this life not as, I need to get as much happiness as I can, because we're always going to be disappointed, but if we think of this as, a mission, I'm here on mission.

If you're a Christian living in a place like Washington, D.C., you're a cross-cultural missionary, full stop. I am here, serving the purposes of Jesus in my generation. At some point, I'll be home with him.

But until then, I'm on mission. And what that means is, you're going to experience, yeah, lots of challenges, lots of suffering, lots of adversity. That's a part of what this mission entails.

But there's also going to be joy, there's also going to be celebration, there's also going to be goodness. It's all going to begin to make sense. And as Paul says in verse 17, when we begin to focus more on home as a future promise, rather than something that we're trying to build here and now, the weight of our suffering begins to be lifted.

And all of a sudden, this suffering that felt so oppressive and burdensome, because we were trying to build heaven right here and now in our own lives, will get lighter and lighter and lighter.

[30 : 22] And he says it will, it will in some ways seem like a light momentary affliction compared to the eternal glory that awaits when we are home. So this is how the gospel gives us courage to endure suffering, pull all of it together.

It grounds us in realism, but then it promises resurrection for our bodies, and it promises that one day we're finally going to come home and our longings will be satisfied in Christ.

And for those who, the last bit of good news for you, for those who have put their faith in Jesus and been baptized in his name, Paul says, even though all of that home and glory is in the future, it's not simply an idea.

We actually get a preview of it. We get a foretaste of it. In verse 5, we have a foretaste of home in the Holy Spirit. There are moments when, in my life, I can just say this, but I think this is true of everybody.

There are moments, and for me, it's in particular sometimes when we're all gathered here, maybe at the Easter vigil, or maybe just a particularly powerful Sunday, and when we're gathered and everybody's singing, and I look around, and we're all just kind of caught up in worship.

[31 : 37] There are these moments where I feel like I'm glimpsing what that future reality will be like. And I think the Spirit gives us these previews. It allows us to experience a little bit of healing now so that we'll know what a world where all suffering has been eradicated will be like.

It allows us to experience a little bit of community and love now so that one day we'll know what it's like to be enfolded by love incarnate. It gives us these little tastes and previews.

And the good news is this. Scripture says that even the greatest of these experiences are merely shadows of things to come. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for these promises. Lord, I know there's so many people who are struggling right now in so many ways.

And I'm sorry. And I wish we could make this pain go away. Lord, I pray that in your Holy Spirit you would do what words cannot do, what ideas cannot do, that you would comfort the afflicted, comfort those who struggle, especially those who struggle alone or in secret.

[33 : 00] And I pray that in these great promises, Lord, as we continue in our prayer and singing and as we come to the table, that we would have a foretaste of home. A foretaste of being fully in your presence.

A foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth. Lord, and I pray this, that we would be people of hope to be salt and light in a world of decay and darkness. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.