

Redemptive Suffering

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[0 : 00] Viktor Frankl was an Austrian neuroscientist, psychiatrist, more notably he was a Holocaust survivor.

And he wrote his most famous book, which is called Man's Search for Meaning, in really about his time in the concentration camp. Because it had a profound impact on him.

He was surrounded by people who were facing unimaginable suffering. And he began to notice that some people were able to endure profound suffering, and yet somehow they remained steady.

They were able to persevere. It didn't crush them. And he shares some remarkable stories of people who seemed like the kind of people who would be utterly crushed on day one, and yet somehow they remained steady.

And there are other people that seemed like the kind of people who would be able to survive a lot, and yet they would be crushed on the first day. And he began to try to figure out what is the thing that makes the difference.

[1 : 05] And that's what his book is about. He realized that the key thing that determines our ability to face and endure suffering is not actually the suffering itself.

It's not the kind of suffering. It's not the extent of suffering, the amount of suffering. It's the meaning that we attach to suffering. The meaning that we attach to suffering.

In other words, if we are able to find or make meaning out of the suffering that we face, it makes all the difference. Now, with that in mind, we want to look at the Apostle Paul and what we read here in 2 Corinthians chapter 4.

Paul says something almost unbelievable. He says, Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

And I would suggest that this goes well beyond what Frankl had in mind. Frankl is talking about simply enduring suffering, but Paul's saying something altogether more.

[2 : 09] He's not just talking about enduring suffering. He's talking about the fact that in his suffering, as he is wasting away, as that is happening to him, he is being renewed.

That suffering for Paul has become a place, a source of spiritual renewal. And the question that we want to ask this morning is, How is such a thing possible? And the answer that we will see is this, that Jesus Christ transformed the role that suffering plays in Paul's life by giving it an entirely new meaning.

Suffering itself can become a source of spiritual growth and life and maturity. And so we're going to look at this passage in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, verses 1 through 12, and we're going to sort of examine this in three parts.

First of all, we want to consider the default perspective on suffering that we see in Corinth, that we see, I think, in modern-day D.C. Then we'll look at a new perspective on suffering that comes through Paul's encounter with Jesus.

And then finally, we will see how that yields in our lives a new pattern for how to face suffering as it comes. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that we don't even have to ask and you're here.

[3 : 31] I thank you that as I look out into this room, Lord, I see friends both new and old. I thank you that as we look out in this room, and if we're here and we are struggling or suffering, feeling hopelessness or despair, we can know we're not alone.

That, Lord, you're the one who sees the truth about our hearts and however we may present on the outside. You know that there are a lot of us here who are struggling in various ways. And we pray that your word would minister to us in ways that are only possible because of your Holy Spirit.

And we ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen. I'm going to get this because my voice is a bit on the fritz, as you can tell. But praise God, it's here enough.

I think God wanted me to talk less this week. And so he took my voice away. But he's allowing me to say a few things from up here. Let's look at the default perspective that we see in the church in Corinth.

The church in Corinth had a situation where there were false teachers who had come in, and they were promoting a kind of health and wealth gospel. Now, if you're not familiar with what that is, it's okay.

[4 : 40] I'll explain it in a minute. But they're promoting a kind of health and wealth gospel. The basic idea is this, is that if you're the kind of person who is successful and good-looking and wealthy and important and influential, it's because you are blessed.

You're hashtag blessed. God has blessed you. And obviously the opposite is also true. If you're unsuccessful, if you're poor, if you're suffering, if you're rejected, then clearly you are not blessed. And in fact, God may very well be punishing you. So people see you sitting on the side of the road asking for money with no place to live. The most common response would be to say, what did he do?

What did she do to end up like that? They assumed that it was your fault, that you had somehow angered the gods. And so this is why some of the leaders are criticizing the apostle Paul.

They're saying, basically, don't listen to anything that guy says. Why would you listen to anything Paul says? It's clear that God is not with him. Look how much he suffers.

[5 : 49] So they would point to the suffering in Paul's life as a way of invalidating all of Paul's teaching. And here's Paul's own description in chapter 11. He doesn't deny the fact that he suffers.

He says this, five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked.

A night and a day I was adrift at sea. I mean, it goes on and on. Now, they would say, and I think it makes sense to many people, common sense anyway, that doesn't sound like someone who's loved by God.

That doesn't sound like someone who's blessed by God. It actually sounds like someone who has been cursed by God. And this is the way that most people tend to think.

It's our common sense way of trying to make sense of our lives and the world. People mistakenly assume that there is a connection between worldly success and spiritual success.

[6 : 50] If somebody is successful by worldly standards, then people assume that is evidence of their spiritual success. That God must really love them.

They must really be close to God. There are many church boards and elder sessions and leadership bodies that have been built primarily out of this fallacy.

Well, they run a very successful, lucrative business. They'd probably make a good elder. And of course, if that is true, then the opposite is also true. If somebody is suffering, if they're a failure by worldly standards, then that's probably evidence of their spiritual failure.

They must have angered God somewhere along the way. This is the perspective that I would say runs through many of the world's great religions. You have karma religions like Hinduism that say if you're suffering, it's because of things that you did in a past life.

Ways that you fell short or sinned. Islam teaches that if you're suffering, it's probably punishment for sins that you've committed in the present life. So you see this in other world religions, but I would say it's also the perspective that we see in our culture.

[7 : 58] Most people assume that life is about trying to be as happy as you can be, which we equate with material success. Why am I here?

It's to be happy. How do I be happy? Well, I'm successful. This is why we bust it year in and year out, pushing ourselves and our kids to climb that ladder, to get the best grades so that we can get into the best colleges, so that we can get the best jobs, so that we can be successful, so that we will be happy.

And that's the way people believe life works. And if there is a God, most people assume that God's job, if he's loving, if he's good, is to help us get there.

Surely God wants me to be happy. Surely God wants me to be successful. This is essentially what the sociologist Christian Smith referred to as the default religion in America.

Right? Life is about being happy and successful. God's job is to help me get there. All God cares about is I'm a basically good person. And good people go to heaven when they die. It's what he called moralistic therapeutic deism.

[9 : 03] So whatever religious institution you affiliate with or have disaffiliated from, whether you call yourself religious or irreligious, theist or atheist, Smith found that down deep, this is what most Americans believe on some level.

Moralistic therapeutic deism. This is why, by the way, the prosperity gospel televangelists of the 20th century were so successful. Right? They were preaching the message that everybody already believed and wanted to hear desperately, wanted to believe.

The self-appointed gurus that we see today on Instagram and TikTok, this is why they're successful. And by the way, they are the spiritual successors of the prosperity gospel televangelists.

They're the next generation preaching the same message. They're all selling the same thing. It's just different packaging. So whether you're donating money out of your retirement fund to get a prayer cloth that's been touched by the person on TV, or whether you are buying supplements and deciding it's time to shift to an all-meat diet, and do ice bath plunges every morning because it's going to change your life, the promise is the same.

You can live longer. You can be happier. You can become more successful if you just buy this product, if you just do this thing. So in our culture, in a culture that thinks that way, when it comes to suffering, what you find is there's typically only one category for suffering.

[10 : 31] The only category we have to really make sense of suffering, to make meaning out of suffering is, well, suffering is unequivocally bad, and it means that either we have failed, or some person or system out there has failed us.

Right? If I'm suffering, if I don't have the life I want, if I'm not happy, if I'm not successful, either I failed somewhere along the way, or some system or person out there failed me, or some combination of both.

It is somebody's fault. Somebody has failed. Because otherwise I wouldn't be suffering. And as far as God goes, for people who bring God into the equation, if we assume that there is a God and that it's God's job to help us pursue a life of happiness and success, then what does suffering show us? Well, God's not doing his job. Why not? Well, either because he doesn't love me or care about me, or because he can't. Or because he doesn't exist.

And you have a lot of people who will encounter major suffering, grief, loss in their lives, and because this is their view of God in life, they leave their faith. Because they say, well, God really let me down.

[11 : 46] God really, I was trusting God to come through and give me that life, but he didn't. He wasn't there. And so they leave. Now, if this is our perspective, if this is the default operating perspective, what happens when you get bad news from the doctor?

You know, we're, some of us are in our 40s and the check engine light comes on and the call's coming. You know? And some of us have gotten a few calls. And it's not like when you're in your 20s.

Right? And some of you are older still and you know that. Some of you got the bad news call when you were a child or when you were a teenager. Right? But what happens when you get that call? What happens when you get fired unexpectedly?

What happens when someone hurts you or betrays you? What do we end up doing? We spend hours ruminating, trying to figure out where we went wrong or how we could have prevented it if I hadn't eaten all those cheeseburgers.

You know? But now, I mean, you know, it's not an excuse to eat all the cheeseburgers you want. I wish it were. But you start trying to think of like, where did I go wrong? Or how could I have prevented this bad thing from happening?

[12 : 54] Because it clearly means the ball got dropped. And then when it comes to God, we say, what's the most common thing we say? Why me, God? Why would you let something like this happen to me?

Why me? Why now? Why this? So then, not only do you have the suffering itself, but you have all of the meaning that you've attached to it. Which is what?

Failure. Failure. God doesn't love me. God doesn't exist. Hopelessness. It's a pile-on that only makes it worse. That's no way to endure suffering. It's not sustainable. So suffering crushes us. That's the default perspective on suffering. Now, a new perspective. Look what happens to Paul.

The thing is, you've got to understand, Paul used to have this exact same perspective. He was a Pharisee back in the day. He was highly successful. He was highly ambitious. He was well-educated. He had all the outward signs of blessing.

[13 : 49] He didn't know that inwardly, spiritually, he was dead and disconnected from God. He had all the outward signs of blessing and success. And then one day, on the road to Damascus, he encounters the resurrected Jesus Christ.

And it changes everything. Because in that encounter, he realizes this. On the one hand, he recognizes immediately, as he sees that glorious light, that Jesus is the full embodiment of God's glory.

That's what Paul means. He's thinking about that as he's writing verse 4. He refers to Jesus as the image of God. Jesus is so blindingly glorious that Paul falls to his face.

And he's struck temporarily blind. On the other hand, Paul knows for a fact what happened to Jesus. That Jesus suffered more than anybody in history.

He knew that Jesus had been humiliated and mocked and tortured and executed. So simultaneously, this glorious image of God standing before him, blindingly bright.

[15 : 03] And on the other hand, humiliation, torture, rejection, suffering, death. And this completely turns everything upside down for Paul. Because Christ is showing him that everything he thinks he knows about suffering is wrong.

And Christ is offering a vision, a meaning for suffering that is far more nuanced, far more beautiful than anything Paul has ever seen in his life.

He realizes this. First of all, the reason that people suffer, the reason that some of us are suffering right now, is not because God is punishing those people.

It's because all human beings have rejected God. As Paul says in verses 3 and 4, it's because people are spiritually blind.

You know, when he was struck blind seeing Jesus, it helped him understand this is the real problem with the human heart. All people, Jews and Greeks, all are spiritually blind and cut off from God.

[16 : 14] And that means, frankly, friends, and I'm sorry to break it to you, the world doesn't work the way it should. There is no fairness. You know, life is not fair.

You know, I had a mentor who used to say, the only kind of fair in this life is the one with cotton candy and a Ferris wheel. There is no fair. I would come to him and I'd say, well, that's not fair. He'd be like, what'd you expect? There is only an approximation of justice.

What that means is that some people can lie and cheat and steal, and they're going to be fabulously wealthy and successful. It means that other people can live morally upright, selfless, self-sacrificial lives, and they're going to face tremendous suffering.

And you say, well, that's not fair. I think you're starting to get it. So that's the first thing. Second thing, God hates suffering more than we do. And God's answer to the problem of suffering when we ask him is not to give us an explanation.

Well, it all goes back to this and that. And if you understand that, that's not God. God's answer to suffering is to enter into it. It's to join us in it. It's to suffer more than we do.

[17 : 23] It's to send his son to die so that one day suffering will ultimately be brought to an end. His answer to suffering is to suffer in order to bring an end to suffering.

And then thirdly, Paul realizes this on that road to Damascus. Suffering does not mean failure. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have failed. It doesn't mean that somebody or some system has failed you.

That might be a part of it. But what Christ shows us is that suffering is actually inseparably linked to glory. That God can use suffering to achieve his glorious purposes in the world.

And you say, well, how do we know that? And Paul would say, well, the cross. The place where you see the worst failure by worldly standards ever.

The worst suffering ever. And yet simultaneously, the cross is the means by which Jesus is glorified.

[18 : 29] The cross is his glory. The cross is the place where Jesus becomes who he was meant to be. The savior of the world. It's the place where God's plans and purposes are finally accomplished.

So suffering is unavoidable because of human sin and rebellion. It's unavoidable. We're all going to suffer to some extent. And yet God is so powerful and God is so loving that he's able to take the worst possible suffering and bring about the greatest possible victory through it.

Which means no suffering is wasted. God is capable of redeeming and repurposing and utilizing all of the hardships we face. You know, I love to talk about Joni Eriksson Thada because her story is so powerful.

Being paralyzed from the shoulders down from a diving accident at age 17. And so many directions could have come out of that incident. But by leaning into the Lord through years of wrestling with God and wrestling with the reality of suffering and glory, out of that was born a ministry that has reached millions of people.

Especially those whose lives are impacted by disability. And she often says this, one of her favorite quotes, when she thinks about her own life and the lives of those who suffer, sometimes God uses what he hates to accomplish what he loves.

[19 : 58] Sometimes God uses what he hates to accomplish what he loves. That's why Paul's able to say, in verse 8, we're afflicted in every way but not crushed.

We're perplexed but not driven to despair. We're persecuted but not forsaken. We're struck down but not destroyed. If you believe that suffering means that God has abandoned you or that you have failed, then when you're afflicted, it's going to crush you.

You know, when you're perplexed, it's going to drive you to despair. It's the meaning that you're attaching that makes the difference. But Paul has come to see that suffering, listen to this, is precisely the place where God can work most powerfully in our lives and where we can connect most personally with him.

He's come to realize that here's the meaning of suffering. Suffering is precisely that place where God can work most powerfully in our lives and where we can connect most personally with him. It's a radically different way of thinking about suffering. And from that, in Paul's life, we begin to see a new pattern emerge, a new pattern for suffering. When a person becomes a Christian, they do so by putting their faith in Jesus.

[21 : 25] They ask Jesus to forgive their sin. They ask Jesus to make them righteous and holy, to reconcile them to God. They ask Jesus that they might be adopted into God's family.

And God answers those prayers, how? By spiritually joining that person to Jesus. It will no longer be you and Jesus. You will become part of Jesus.

His life will become your life. Your life will be subsumed into his life. You become one with Jesus. And if you want to know the core idea that runs through all of Paul's letters, what it means to be a Christian, it is that truth.

You become spiritually joined to Jesus. Now, that's extremely important. That union is marked by baptism. But how does Paul often describe baptism?

It's a death and resurrection. When you're baptized into the life of Christ, you're baptized into a life that is shaped. The pattern of that life is death and resurrection. So here's what Paul begins to realize.

[22 : 25] Since we are spiritually connected to Jesus, even though that pattern of death and resurrection is a one-time thing in Jesus' life, that pattern continues in the lives of Christians.

That pattern continues. That becomes the shape of our life. So this is what Paul means when he says in verse 10, we are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

We are carrying death and resurrection. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake. We're always being given over to death. It's a continuous thing that is happening all the time, day in and day out, year in and year out.

Why? So that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. He's saying, my entire life now is shaped by this cycle of death and resurrection that is happening again and again and again.

The normal Christian life repeatedly reenacts the death and resurrection of Jesus. So how does this work practically? We enter into some kind of suffering in which we realize our creatureliness, we realize our weakness, we realize the brokenness of the world.

[23 : 42] We enter into that kind of suffering. Some of you are there right now. But in that suffering, we also become aware of areas of our lives where there is sin, where we are believing things that are not true, where there is rebellion or resistance to God.

And then by grace, in that time of suffering, there is an opportunity to put those things to death. Those parts of us, those sinful parts of us are put to death. And then we emerge from that suffering with a kind of new life, a deeper faith, greater maturity.

We're a little more conformed to the image of Christ. Right? So practically speaking, this becomes a pattern for life. It becomes like a map that gives meaning to our suffering.

It's a new roadmap to show us how to navigate suffering. So the next time we face hardship, we could spend time ruminating about where we went wrong or who let us down or shaking our fist at God and saying, how could you do this to me?

And you know, there's a time and a place for that. God's big enough for us to be angry at him. But ultimately, that response is not going to change anything. You can ruminate day and night about all the things you could have done differently.

[24 : 59] It's not going to change anything. Instead, what if, hypothetically, what if we simply say to ourselves, okay, this, whatever it is for you, this is yet another cycle of death and resurrection that the Lord is leading me into.

And here's the thing. We accept the things we cannot change. We simply accept them. We receive them from the Lord.

And then we can begin to prayerfully ask, in the midst of this, what needs to be put to death in me? And you say, well, what a cruel question to ask somebody who's facing a hard time. That's a lot. No, no, no, no. It's a recognition that in the midst of the evil that is a part of living in a broken world, God is constantly working redemptively in our lives.

It's a recognition that life is ultimately not about happiness, that happiness is a byproduct of deeper, truer things, things like holiness, spiritual peace that comes with knowing the Lord.

[26 : 12] And then from that place, we can begin to ask questions of our own heart. What inside me is being spotlighted by this suffering? What is blocking me from greater trust or greater faith in the Lord?

What needs to be put to death in me right now? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to turn away from? What truths do I need to embrace? Right?

So just to give you a couple of examples, if you are suffering from significant fear and anxiety, significant fear and anxiety, you feel like your life is just grit and a vice grip of fear, what needs to be put to death?

What is blocking us from greater trust in the Lord? Maybe we are imagining, maybe we are really good at imagining some future worst case scenario.

And in vivid detail, we can see the horrible things that are going to happen. And maybe you realize, you know, I'm actually putting more faith in that.

[27 : 25] I am more certain that that imaginary scenario is going to happen than I am of the Lord. And you realize that.

That's actually, that's what I believe. That's my God. That's my, that's the reality that I'm embracing.

It's that imaginary thing next week. Maybe that's what you realize. Maybe, maybe, maybe you realize, I actually don't believe that, that, that things are okay unless I'm in control.

I actually think that, that, that my life would be better and the world would be better if I could just be in control of everything. And maybe, maybe you realize that. And you realize these are things that need to be put to death.

And then you turn, you begin to embrace these truths. You know what? Christ is with me. Uh, nothing can separate me from his love. If those bad things happen, Christ will be with me in those things.

And they're, they're, they're not things that he can't handle. And because of him, I know what Paul says in Romans eight, that God is always working things for the good of people like me, the good of people who have been called according to his purposes.

[28 : 32] Even if it doesn't feel like it in the moment, I can trust that God is working all of this toward his good in my life. Right? So you're, you're, you're letting go of, you're putting to death these false beliefs and you're beginning to embrace things that you know are true.

Or just to give you one other example, if you were suffering because you are in, in conflict with another person, uh, if you're struggling with anger or bitterness or unforgiveness, and in the midst of that, your heart is crying out for justice.

Your, your heart is crying out for validation. Your heart is crying out for people to take your side. You want to be proven right. You want to be vindicated. But you also ask in the, that's a form of suffering.

You ask what needs to be put to death in me in the midst of this? Maybe, maybe I'm assuming I know that other person's motives. Maybe I'm assuming and filling in the blanks on what their intentions were or are.

That needs to be put to death. Maybe I'm putting myself in a position to judge someone else's life.

That needs to be put to death. And then we begin to embrace the truth.

[29 : 48] Hey, only God knows the truth about the hearts of people. Only God knows what's going on. The older I get, the more I realize, the more bad I am.

I realize that I am at, at assuming I know what other people are thinking or feeling. Or you embrace the, the truth that only God can truly judge human beings.

And the judgment ultimately belongs to him. And that God will bring justice in his time. So all of these experiences like this are kind, are a kind of many death and many resurrection.

They, they contribute to the death of sin in you. The mortification of sin, as the Puritans used to say. And they contribute to the growth of Christ in us. So going back to the beginning, just bringing all this back together.

I do think that Viktor Frankl was correct. The most important thing that determines our ability to endure suffering, is the meaning we attach to it.

[30 : 49] But here's what we need to see. You will find no greater source of meaning, for the suffering in your life, than the one you will find in Jesus Christ. You find a new perspective, that suffering is precisely that place where God can work most powerfully in our lives, and where we can connect most personally with him.

And then you inherit a new pattern, a pattern that has shaped the lives of Christians for thousands of years. Suffering is an invitation to share in the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and ultimately to become more and more like him.

Let's pray. Lord, would you take these words, and would they be words that become flesh?

Would you press these truths? Would you impress upon us, especially those of us here who are struggling or suffering in various ways, would you impress upon us?

Give us a vision of your cross. Give us a deep understanding of the shape of your life. And might that become a map of meaning for our lives?

[32 : 05] That whether we feel that our suffering is meaningless and arbitrary, that you're capricious, or whether we feel that we're being punished, whether we feel that we have failed, or that someone has wronged us or let us down, may we accept the things we cannot change, and may we enter into this cycle through which we become more and more like you, until that glorious day when your promise is fulfilled, when we see you face to face.

We pray this in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.