

Session 3 – Lessons Learned Pastoring for 40 Years in a Town of 600

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Date: 03 April 2025

Preacher: Steve Teter

[0 : 0 0] This is going to be for all pastors. Maybe if you're a senior pastor or running by yourself, particularly for you, and if you're! you're by vocation, you hear this later, or you can't, you know what happened? We couldn't have more respect than those who work full-time in class to lead the church.

It's just unlingual. Let you know a little bit about myself. Franklin is a town of 750 and a county of, I think it's probably 700. I haven't looked. I looked for the county population, it said 600 in town.

I thought our county population was 7,500. I looked, it's down to 6,200, and you might be right about that, I looked recently. But we're a county of 6,200 people. It's the fifth largest land-wise in the state of West Virginia.

We're 40 miles west of Harrisonburg, Virginia, and James Madison University, if you know anything about the Chandra Valley. And we're about 50 miles from Snowshoe Resort, Snowshoe Ski Resort in West Virginia, the big one.

It's a little bit, it's the next county over. They get 140 inches of snow, we get 40 inches of snow. So that's just, that's the difference. But we're right in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains on the Alligating Front. We have, we have no four-lane road to our county.

[1 : 0 5] We have one stoplight in our county. We have small farms, trout streams, and beautiful scenery, about 90,000 acres of national forest. That's our county. We have no coal mines.

We're the pretty part of West Virginia. We have no industry. NAFTA took every industry we had overseas. What little industry we had, it took overseas. We had a big shoe plant, 750 people, boy, but overseas.

NAFTA, clothing factories. We have small naval communications stations. We have not big satellite dishes in the middle of the mountains. It's still being run, it's NSA. Tells you something about that.

Baby base is gone. It's run from DC now. So we don't have industry. Our largest employer is the school system. Our population is aging. It's declined over the last 20 years, probably about 30%.

It's 50% smaller than 100 years ago. So our population has just declined. And so about 10 years in the ministry, and I'll tell you a little bit more about the story. I asked a man who might have heard of him, pastor and teacher Mike Bullmore, one afternoon.

[2 : 1 0] About a decade in the ministry, I said, why does God have me pastoring in this rural town? Why does he have me here? Mike thought for a moment and he said these words, God has you here because God has his people here.

Yeah, God. That's why we pastored in rural towns. I grew up to four to five children. I was of a kind, godly parents and a kind, godly local dentist in our town.

I graduated from dental school at WVU in 1982. Happy to move back to practice with my dad. My wife moved to Franklin when she was in the seventh grade. And we married during graduate school.

And so we moved back to Franklin in 1982. Our church, if you look at the background, I grew up, I was birthed out of the Bible study that met my parents, Holly, from 1975, the summer of 1975.

And I was 17 until 1982, when we came back from college. Most who attended that, were young adults, said it grew the second by the charismatic renewal.

[3 : 16] Or were saved during that time. And that Bible study grew to where from five people to 35 people. And over the years of the evidence like. In 1982, after my wife and I returned home from college because our local church and pastor no longer believed the inspiration of the scriptures or the central tenets of the gospel, a few of us then Bible study began meeting together on Sunday mornings.

And now that we called a pastor, we began to grow. That's where it actually started, 1982. But we experienced many challenges. And in 1987, by God's kindness, our, you know, rural church was adopted by Sovereign Grace Ministries.

There's some connections there. That's the reason we still, that's from an earthly perspective, the reason we still have that. They really served us. We are part of a larger network of churches.

And then in spite of growing ill practice, my dad, I began to sit to call in pastoral ministry six and a half years into practice. And to make a long story short, that call was confirmed in other ways.

And with my dad's blessing, God bless my dad. I'm blessed. So the practice, previous pastor went to another area to plant a church, took the other men of the leadership team with him to plant the church.

[4 : 35] And I was as tall as the pastor. And my wife and I had three children, three young children. And my wife was pregnant with our fourth. I had no formal theological training.

Raised in the creation hall. It was supposed to have a year of theological training. That didn't happen. There was a guy who would back years, then a year and six months, and I started leading the church. And it was, it was challenging.

I will say this again. I just want you to move the back now. And my wife and I have been deeply personally blessed.

And our church has been deeply blessed. And if I had to do all I would forget, I would do it all I would do. After 36 issues, I could honestly say that. But letting the honest castoral ministry is hard.

And what we're rewarding is often very challenging. And there's times out if I could have quit, I would have quit. And I'll say it to be honest. So what have I learned after 36 years of pastoral ministry?

[5 : 40] I thought which way to go because that's a pretty broad topic. But I thought I'm going to talk with the pastors, more about our lives as pastors. And it hit that angle, that part of what I'd say I've learned.

And I've learned everything. I've learned from others. I don't have this. It seems to everybody always say that I don't have an original thought. I've learned from others. And the guys were, after you walked over here, somebody said, yeah, we've been taught this.

I'm going to make a few assumptions as a beginning. I'm going to assume that being a pastor isn't just a job for you. I'm going to assume that. I'm going to assume that you love your town and your people, at least most of the time.

All right? I am going to say the thoughts that I'm about to share our novel are new. They apply to pastors in all contexts. However, I think as a pastor in a rural area, the spawn might have shined upon our lives and who we are and how we've been in your bloodshed ones in your operatory.

And how we do those things are, these characteristics are, as Stephen said, we live really under a glass house.

[6 : 51] We live under a microscope. People dove us. I mean, the people in my church read my mail. They can tell you everything about me. I can tell you everything about them too. But just to say these things matter.

So I thought, what should I share? I thought I'm going to share some fundamental things that really matter. I think really foundational issues. And I think I've reached in the choir. I hope, as you hear these things, I'll thank you for the agreements with Sam.

I mean, hopefully just fresh and encouraged. So let's pray. So we'll give that as an introduction. And we're going to pray. And we're also going to keep an eye on the time for me. But let's pray. Father, I thank you for these many of you.

Lord, you have called them. And that you've called them to a critical calling. And that will affect silly lives.

Lord, we want to serve you. We want to serve you well. Lord, that we might hear, not only well done, but we might enter your kingdom and see the fruits of faithful ministry. We want to pray that you use these few masks to encourage these men.

[7 : 53] Lord, for those who are discouraged, we want to pray that you use what is shared here to encourage them to refresh them about being pastors of the gospel. And I pray that Jesus is letting you.

Amen. Okay. What about literally after 36 years of ministry? I'm going to give you seven things. The first three or four will be longer than the last. It will be shorter. Okay. I just thought, okay, seven is a good number, right?

Right there. I'm on top of the spirit already. We'll pick seven. To be a faithful pastor and servant of Christ, we must first of all, we must guard our lives, brothers.

We've got to guard our lives. And you know the scripture, watch your life. 1 Timothy 4, 16, keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.

Persist in this, for by doing so, by keeping a close watch on yourself and on the teaching, by doing so you will say both yourself. Think about this.

[8 : 49] You will say both yourself and your hearers. Or the analogy says, watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them. There's a reason that almost all the qualifications of fellowship and listening in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are character qualifications, not gifting or personality qualifications.

I mean, teaching is it, right? Everything else, our character, there are character qualities that we must grow in godliness. Growing in godliness as a pastor is non-negotiable.

And too long, too long is the list of fallen pastors who have not watched their lives closely. And I don't say that eerily. I don't say that condescendingly. It's the man about who God said he's a man out of my heart.

If that man, King David, could fall, all of us have to go listen with us, brothers. That's why we just watch our lives closely. How many lives have been destroyed?

How many churches have been damaged by pastors who have been called by scandalous sins? And had men know that were far and near. I know personally, and you people, you know, we know.

[9 : 58] You used to say, well, I see many pastors. No, we know, don't we? It's not just that. We must watch. This is critical. Everything else we do, if we don't watch our lives, then we will not save our hearers and ourselves.

That's what it says. So we've got to watch our lives closely. We've witnessed men more godly than ourselves who have not watched our lives. How heartbreaking to even read their letters of true repentance.

And we know there's forgiveness for true repentance. Yet we've also done that much of the damage will never be undone. So we must watch the internet brothers.

I'm going to use practical areas. We fight with this. Don't we? It's only a second one. You know this. We must fight. We must fight what we see on the internet. We must fight media.

We must be aware that we're a friendly member. A friendly female member. I'm not saying they're doing anything to fairies. I'm just saying we need to watch ourselves. We need to watch ourselves.

[11 : 00] Or the hurting wife is coming for counseling. We must guard. We must watch. The one or those times when you're having conflict in our home. And there's someone over here that seems to understand.

You must watch our lives, brothers. And he is deceiving. He is deceitful. And our hearts can deceive us. So I'm just giving you a couple, a few practical things.

Oh, for me in my life, I've never tried to get closer to a lady than I was to her. I was, oh, you know her husband. I want to have relationships. You know. Don't counsel. Doubt the world.

You just say, you know, there's a place along the line. You have that little flag breeze up. You know, it's time to just back up. You're not sinning. We must watch our lives.

You must watch our lives continuously. And I've also realized that just watching, that growing older and increasing age is not an animate. That's because the most, some of the most recent men that I've ever had fallen are in their 60s, up in their 70s.

[12 : 04] So brothers, if you love your church, watch your life. So that you will watch your life closely. And we're not just watching to avoid being scantled of sin, but we also watch our lives so that we might progressively grow in sanctification throughout our lives.

The penalty of sin has been paid. Praise God. All of it. The power of sin has been broken. It has, but the presence of sin remains. That's not. It remains in our lives.

And so, so Paul went to Timothy. Timothy, let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers of example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

We want our folks to see us grow. God, let us survive our lives. Yeah, I've been past in 36 years. I think the church to see me grow. I think that we have great rewards in heaven because they endured when I needed to grow.

I think that's the truth. But the reality is, small towns people know us. And growing in sanctification must be similar to our character in the lives. And to the best of our ability, we must follow our message.

[13 : 12] We must follow us. We're watching that we're not falling in the scale of sin, but we're watching our lives. We might consistently grow in God in us throughout our lives. And that means mortification, putting off the sin that remains, the pride, those things which cling to us.

As John always said, we're killing sin or we're killing you. Or Hebrews 12, 1, the sin which so clings so closely. We all have them as though. But we don't. We have them in our lives.

And we want to fight those. We want to mortify those sins. There are sins that make our lives and ministry less effective. Here's something I think particularly unique to us. Brothers, we must put off envy and jealousy.

We must fight that. Discontent that these things, these things are so corrosive. So corrosive to our souls. And it causes the lose joy and kill joy.

So Lord, help us to be in our intent. Wherever we're at, where God is placed, I'm not looking for this, the role that I'm in as a stepping stone in the bigger church. Now that doesn't mean you might never go to another church.

[14 : 16] I'm not saying that. But if you're saying, hey, this is where I'm at for now, but I'm just biding my time, you're never going to be content because it's never going to be big enough. All right? Because the issue is not the size of the church.

The issue is either my servant. I'm not doing what I'm doing. What am I doing? It's forward. That's the issue. All right? So we need to fight those things and we want to put on, develop the fruit of the Spirit.

You know what that is. Joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and judgment. We want to put on the fruit of the Spirit that can make us the gospel. And those around us. And that'll be a lifelong pursuit.

So brothers, watch your lives with us. Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness. Watch and evaluate time and habits based on the most of your time for these or you all.

And it says, if we watch our lives, we will save both ourselves, head and our ears. Lord, help us to persevere that. Amen? And then secondly, it says, we must guard our doctrine.

[15 : 15] Lord, the teaching. The teaching is not our teaching. It's not my gospel. My gospel. It's the faithful and sprawl delivered to the saints, right? We're trying to share God's story.

God's gospel. It's his wonderful gospel. So we must guard our doctrine, the teaching that we are given to trust. And so my question is this.

As a servant of Christ, am I fully confident in God's word? Am I fully confident in God's inspired word when it comes to healing a past?

Watch your life, but watch your doctrine. Not fearing off the 1%. You know, 1% off after 36 years is a long ways off, right?

We must, as a servant of Christ, am I fully confident in his word? You know what you have to say. What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. We know that's true.

[16 : 15] In the same vein, I think it's also true that for the Christian pastor, what comes to mind when he thinks about God's word is the most important thing about his ministry. Because what you think about God's word is his revelation, whether you believe that, will ultimately determine how you think and how you preach about him.

Beers. Are you confident that this is the inspired word of God? In what? Sufficient. Inerrant. Inerrant.

In your ministry. Are you confident? You must wrestle that you be confident that this is God's revelation to us. Now I'm assuming you got to preach to the choir here.

But whole denominations are lost because they believe it's mostly God's word. Or they believe it contains God's word. And they're lost. No brothers, this is God's word. To use it, all Christian prayers in the scripture is God.

It is. And it's useful. Profitant for teaching, proof, correction, training, and righteousness. That the man of God might be adequately equipped for every good work. We must say that, brothers.

[17 : 22] We must clean this. And I'm going to give a practical application here that's a little harder. Do you believe that God's word is sufficient when it comes to counseling your people's needs and their lives?

This is a big one for us today, is it? Praise God for true Christian counselors. There's a lot of Christian counseling that isn't biblical counseling, brothers. Do you believe that God's word is sufficient?

And are we aware that presuppositions from God's word is many times, dynamically opposed to the counseling that is in the world. The Bible begins with, in the beginning God.

Much counseling does not begin with, in the beginning God. Amen. Okay, that we are comparable to God. If we sin against our responses, all these things.

I hit this one because this is one that we deal with, all right? There's a fundamental difference between how we counsel someone from God's word to the beginning God, man fell, there's redemption, and the Lord has restored all things to himself.

[18 : 24] I mean, that's the big story back, right? What is our greatest problem? Our greatest problem is, as I said, I don't want to continue to hear this, and our hope is in Jesus Christ. That's our hope. And it expands out in myriad ways.

So, brother, you've got to think in our preaching, what do I believe? Do I believe this is God's word? Am I confident in that? Am I confident in to counsel?

And that's massive for us, because we're in a culture that always looks to the hemispheres. Brothers, do we need to grow in God's word?

Yes, I'm not trying to simplify this, right? I'm not saying we don't ever go to someone who is a true Christian counselor. I'm not saying, I'm not thanking God for someone. But I am saying we must guard that we are confident that God's word is sufficient.

The only truth is sufficient for my congregation is states. Okay, don't get off too far there. Do that out there a little bit for you. Number three, guys, to be effective biblical pastors over the long haul.

[19 : 27] Over the long haul, but this will be priority for you, made in the preaching. We must guard our preaching. And if you're teaching, if you're striving to teach, it is going to be teaching. What do I mean by that?

It means that if I'm a preaching pastor in the church, and sometimes if you're a single pastor, you're the preaching pastor in the church, then it's you, all right? I think about it early on.

I think about times, rural pastors particularly. Preaching God's word or teaching God's word must remain the main priority in my mind. Okay, I totally concur with what Steven said about getting involved in community and all these things.

But the preaching of God's word must be central in the life of our churches, brothers. Okay? As what Paul told Tim, as we preach the word, be prepared in season analysis and correct the group, be encouraged with great patience and careful instruction.

Here's the reality. All rural pastors wear so many different hats. We're involved in visitation and counseling. We might be in charge of youth ministry. We might be the children's ministry director.

[20 : 34] We might be the meeting overseer, the administrator. Last Friday, I was trimming shrubber around our church. All right? That's what I was doing. Trimming shrubber because it needed to be done. So I trimmed shrubber.

Shrubber trimming can't become a big rock in my mind. See, listen, if you're the preaching pastor, the big rock in your life is preaching. You don't have to obviously come to the strike.

You put the big rocks in your schedule first, then you put the little things in. You hear a preaching pastor, then when it comes to your week, preparation for Sunday morning is the big rock that's got a figure.

So you've got to guard it. If you're a support pastor, if we have them in our church, if you're a support pastor, you guard that pastor's time. You guard his time. Why is that such a big deal?

Well, for a couple of reasons. First of all, because that's what we've talked about to everybody in the church. You're going to be preaching. There are 25 to 200 people that are giving up an hour of time to do what you have to say from God's Word.

[21 : 35] You've got no other thing you like. That's what we need. It's how you lead primarily. It's how you counsel primarily. And everyone in the church is here. It has the most important time of the week for them to hear God's Word.

No other thing you are teaching, stirring, counseling, evangelizing, such a large group of people. So plan your week. If you're a preaching pastor, plan your week around a message prep. And I know there are crises that come.

I've had them. There are things that happen. They do happen. But we are at that time. You want to build your church around God's Word. And that happens when you're preaching God's Word.

You want to build it around that. And our preaching must be Bible saturated. We know that. God's Word. It's God's Word that's living out. And I've got the sharpening death, right?

It's God's Word. My thoughts mean it's God's Word. Sharper than a double-edged sword. Piercing the division of soul and spirit. And able to judge the faults and intentions of the heart.

[22 : 34] It's not the creation of society. We want to bring God's Word to our people on Sunday morning. We want them to come to hear you. Preaching God's Word.

Okay? So you want to preach God's Word must remain our main priority. I preach God's Word must be Bible saturated. This is just some bullet points. Preaching must be gospel-centered, Christ-centered preaching.

You know this, guys. I'm just preaching to choir. It's the power of salvation for our holy place. It's God's amazing grace whereby He's going to save the people in your community. All right? That's what's going to bring people to Christ.

It's the power of salvation. And then just to hear these verses again for others. For what we preach is not ourselves. Right? But Jesus Christ is the Word.

And ourselves as your service for Christ, I say, Christ, you hear them. Our collage is going, Henry proclaim. Henry proclaim. Orning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom.

[23 : 33] And we will present everyone in the strength of Christ. That's what's going on in the second mornings. That's why preaching is so important. I'm not saying teaching is not important in other venues. I'm not saying counseling is not important. It is important to be among the sheep, right?

Because shepherds must smell like sheep, right? You just got to smell like sheep. You got to be among the sheep. There's no replacement for this. There's no replacement.

This is a very important part of this. Paul wrote that Christ died for our sins and the blood of his Christians. That he was buried. That he was raised on the third day of all his doings. We're set, created, and the word of the message from Christ.

We're preaching his gospel. I want to know his gospel. I want to know all the implications of that gospel from my folks' lives. I want them to hear. I'm not spending the time in the Lord with who we are.

We want to do all we can to preach God's Word, saturated scriptures and Christ's Sither. And then that's my conviction. This is the conviction.

[24 : 33] I believe that normally I believe normally expository preaching is what builds our churches. I preach topics for a number of years until I've been. All right. I believe expository preaching is, I think, I think a great way to thank God.

I'm not saying different topics. I'm not going to talk about right now. You come to see. We preach to the scriptures, close to the scriptures. Why? Well, John Calvin said it this way. Let us, let us not take it into our heads to seek God out anywhere else than in the sacred word.

Or to think anything about him that is not prompted by his word. Or to speak anything that is not taken from his word. That's expository preaching. We want to go into that word. We want to take everything out of that word.

And nothing besides that word. Now, I'm not saying do like John Calvin. He preached in the book of Acts from August 25th, 1549 to March 1554.

Five years in the book of Acts. Don't think that's us. Don't think that's us today. But what an example. Exiles and Geneva for three years. And this Sunday he returned back and didn't say anything about exile.

[25 : 38] Just start getting very next person right? You get blood on something. That's going to be the expository preaching. All right. Listen, one last thing on preaching. Our preaching must be clear and affect us.

It must be clear and affect. Now, this is just a very pragmatic statement. What we've learned for 26 years, try to be clear. Beside your wife if you're married.

Solicit feedback with your messages from a couple of trusted leaders. Ask them, was it clear? Ask them about the message. You're not looking for fault factors.

There are people who want to give you advice about your message. They are glad to give you advice. You don't want those people to, if they're too quick to only give anyone, reject those. All right? But you should have a couple of food that I wanted to say.

I think this is basically what you're currently giving evidence of grace first. We don't want to distribute to you. I think this area wasn't clear. I think you need to stay close to the mains.

[26 : 37] That's Julie, I promise you don't stay close to the mains. You need to stay close to the mains ones here. If you could find your wife a couple of folks that would do that for you, that will serve you over the years in preaching.

And it really will. Okay? That's the third place. First of all, guard your life. Guard your doctrines. Trust God's word. Make sure you guard your time that you are making preaching new centers alive in your church.

Number four, it's a little different. We must learn to turn to Christ and his cross in the midst of inexplicable suffering. This is a big one.

To be a pastor is to choose the pathway of suffering because we follow within the steps of the suffering circuit. We're going to experience suffering, brothers. Suffering is inevitable and often inexplicable in our lives and the lives of our king.

And that suffering comes in many forms. Two things. When I was a dentist, you had the patient in, you did the work, and they thanked you and they pedied you.

[27 : 45] It was a very straightforward reaping in the stomach. When I became a pastor, that didn't happen. And it was hard for years. Well, also on the negative side of suffering, there was times when I was there where I thought, well, I can make a straight life, this to this.

This, they experienced this suffering because of this in their life. And I thought, okay, you can all suffer and you can make a straight life. I was young, I was naive, I was wrong.

Okay? Suffering comes in many forms. We experience it personally through desertions, disappointments, setbacks. We have seasons lacking faithfulness. We don't understand why.

It just happens. It does happen. We experience oppositions and we walk over seasons with hope deferred. I mean, I know things are hard, brothers. They're not easy.

It is part of pastoral ministry. I think, particularly the small gap, if we compare ourselves to what the American model is. And it is the American models. Okay? We deal with the hope deferred.

[28 : 43] Now, in those times, and I will say this, we must give no rip of self-edity, which is always destructive and paralyzing. The self-edity is always destructive and paralyzing in ministry. We have to ask God to help us and our friends to help encourage us to do that. Okay? We must trust God, God's sovereignty, along with his great promises and all those things I just made.

Okay? Those are sufferings that we're all going to experience. But I want to talk about a different suffering. How about the suffering that is deep but dark and is totally inexplicable?

It happens in your life because you're going to be in a rural church and you're going to experience suffering. The first funeral I did was of a young couple who had a baby in our church, premature, three months in the ICU, got home, and a few days later died of spirits.

The people were eating the moods. Why do you do that? My second funeral was of a close to remember of a community of suicide. Yeah. And you're going, Lord, what about this?

[29 : 50] The deep dark values of the least people suffering, chronic suffering, children who drift away from the faith. Health issues with loved ones.

There's a chronic, here's something key. A sickness or a tragic death, brothers who've left the faith. We experience that suffering from that. As a small town pastor, we deal directly with inexplicable suffering.

In our church, and Walter just asked me to do a message a couple years ago in church. In our church, we went through a season of nine deaths by family and close friends and church members in 16 months.

Okay. And that included my dad was an old man, so he died in a ripe season of life. He was 91. But I had to be involved with talking about it. And he was a godly man.

But in two weeks, my dad and two first cousins all died in this man in two weeks. And I'm going to a funeral for one while the other, I know, is dying. These were followed by many others, whether you were seeing my, as commonly as my sister, I expect to be losing her youngest son and me on midnight Christmas Eve.

[30 : 53] Do you believe both of them? But I think deep and inexplicable suffering will either drive us closer to or away from God. And brothers, as pastors, we cannot say it's in.

We must continue to minister. How do you do that? How do you do that? It's a crisis. And here's what's inexplicable in my family. The two siblings of mine, I would say, were the most godly growing up and through my day, have influenced by my parents.

They're the ones who suffered first. And I have no answer to that. I have no answer. Both of them have lost children. Pretty much hope. I want to read a quote.

I'm going to give you about three or four quotes. There's a book by Austin Guinness called Trusting God in the Dark. It has been very helpful for me. Particularly, I think, the third chapter I believe, or third section.

Here's a quote from Austin Guinness. He says, and this is one of the challenges. Suffering is the most acute trial that faith can face. That was the inexplicable suffering. And the questions it raises are the sharpest, the most insistent, and the most damaging that faith will meet.

[31 : 58] Here's the question. Can faith bear the pain and still trust God suspending judgment when we don't know how it happened?

We're going to look for answers. We're going to try to figure out why this happened. Can we trust God and suspend judgment, rest in the knowledge that God is there, God is willing, God knows best? Or will the pain be so great that only meaning will make it endurable?

So that reason will be pressed further and further and judgment's trust be made. I must have meaning out of this. I must make meaning. There must be meaning in this suffering.

And I'm going to look for meaning. And I'm going to tell you, God's going to come out and show you in the state if you do that. Your faith hasn't told us everything.

And then he says this, but the Christian's faith is to be itself. And that God who God has such talents, it must suspend judgment. Not try to figure out the answer and say, Father, I do not understand, but I trust you.

[32 : 57] I'm not saying we shouldn't try to understand suffering. I'm not saying that. There's going to be times you're not going to know. The hardest thing I've been to do, I can't explain it. And it wasn't me directly.

It was those I loved. And I looked at it and I knew that prayed for their kids and felt they had promises for God that had them. Terrible, tragic, sin.

I must learn to suspend judgment. Say, Father, I don't understand and I trust you. Now the question is, how can we do that? Here's another quote. There are facts of life and fallen world that we will never be able to explain.

But we must never explain the way. We can't just easily explain the same way. We can't go that way either. He says, Fatal, like, can't suspend judgment on these questions.

For there is no question. We cannot leave this God. If he is the father in Jesus Christ. Okay. How can I be sure that God is there and that God is good?

[33 : 55] Is the answer satisfactorily only in Jesus Christ? Any, quote, truth of God's existence or argument in favor of his goodness that ends anywhere else is bound to be in a place of a rock.

Do it. Isaiah 50, 10 says, Let him who walks in darkness and has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and be loud in his God.

That chapter is about my suffering, sir. All right. Listen, let him who walks in darkness and has no light. You're going to have these times, brothers. It's dark. You don't have answers.

Let him trust the name of the Lord and be loud in his God. What's our God's name? The New Testament. Our God is the God and the Father of our glory and the Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is. So when we hear that name, or you remember this is a God who 2,000 years ago, while I was yet to be skinned, died of the new Calvary's, and shed his own blood for my soul.

[34 : 56] That's where I see the love of God, clearly displayed in the dark. I can look back on the cross where he took my sins upon himself. For he died for his enemies and set my soul free.

So that's the glass whereby we say, I don't understand. I don't understand the meaning, but I'm going to live a life through Calvary still. I know that Jesus Christ died for me.

And because of that, I know he's good. He is good. That's a historical fact. That he died in my place. Think about those things. That's a short synopsis of a true sentiment.

That we must stand firm and if a believer in God endures to his pastors and be faithful. That that truth be the enduring right in God's love that shouts in the darkness of the spell, my severe suffering.

You don't understand. While he is a yes sinner, God made him in madness into beasts in front of us. In him we might become the righteous God. That is amazing with our brothers.

[36 : 00] And desire that. Okay? We should go for all of that, but I won't. You know. To walk faithfully over your years, you must have a band of brothers who walk with us. We're on the shed this morning.

The example of how much it means to have a band of brothers, have brothers who walk with you in Christian ministry. Having Godly friends and I would say Godly brothers makes a lot of difference in times of discouragement.

I have three other friends, older guys in Song of Grace that we've been friends for 30 years. And there's been times from two of them particularly.

And if you've come to Franklin and I've gone there and they have done nothing but the courage of my soul. And I'm not sure I would have made it through without those brothers as a rural pastor. And then it's, you know, the pond is bigger than the small pond that I'm playing in.

It's a seed that's bad, right? You hear other brothers come and share and encourage you, strengthen you, and listen to the challenges you're having. Get out in the middle of it. Just to be able to bare your soul with brothers, we need that.

[37 : 01] We all need that. And it's not always easy. But I would encourage you to find those brothers. Jesus in the garden, took disciples with you, calls example in life, took guys with him. Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, when the bird of the snake in Oxford in 1555.

They were there together and preaching to each other as they built flames around them. Right? You know, that story. The Bible says a friend loves at all times and a brother's ought for mercy. Find brothers who know you, but don't need you.

Who know you, but don't need you. And I have friends who are pastors. I thank God for their cravings so many ways. And I have friends, and I think two of them particularly, in our church that are just friends.

And they don't need me. Matter of fact, they like to make fun of me. Find brothers who make you laugh on your side. Here, find a couple of those guys. And these guys, one of them is a welder and the other is a turkey farmer.

Right? He was on a SWAT team in a city at one time. He was a turkey farmer. And they're just hilarious. They make me laugh. They don't, they, they respect me, but they don't take me too seriously.

[38 : 11] Right? These, the need these proud of you guys. I pray that you'll have, have a friends like that. So that's number five. Number six, to walk faithfully over the long haul. We must keep eternity in view.

Brothers, we want to finish well. And to do that, we must look beyond our ministry, our talent, and our calling even, and look to our Savior in heaven.

We are first and foremost His Son. He made me His child long before He called me in the management. Good. And I'll still be His child long after, long after I'm no longer in ministry or the air.

Sure, sir. Brothers, you want to look beyond this life. Christ is my identity. He is my identity, not my position as a pastor. Not my God. I'm not, I'm 67.

I'm going to be 68. I'm going to be handing the rings over. At some point, my identity is Christ. He's got to be Christ, brothers. We know this forever.

[39 : 08] Remember Hebrews 13, 13, 14. Therefore, let us go to Him outside the camp, and better approach it, and He heard. And then these words, for here we have no lasting city. We have no lasting city, your brothers.

But we seem to see that it is to come. That's the mentality Paul had. Romans 8, for I consider the sufferings of this present time. And I would imagine some of you are going to see suffering right now that is severe.

But Paul had said, I don't consider the sufferings of this present world being compared to the glory that is going to reveal to us. But I don't know what you're going through, but it's nothing compared to the glory that is going to reveal to you.

And Christ can do. I can promise you that. I can promise you that. Therefore, we do not lose heart, he says that Corinthians. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day for this light, momentary affliction, and for you're praying for us an eternal way of glory beyond all comparison.

Think on these things, brothers. As you look not to the things that are seen, but as to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

[40 : 16] Now, brother, set your gaze, work with labor, labor with all you can right now. Set your gaze beyond both. Set your gaze beyond this age, to the age of Christ you interpret.

There will be no more sickness, no more sorrows, no more late night with some calls. You will see you face to face. And we will worship and be what we are created to be.

And we will sing gladly, because we all sing gladly for you to see you in pity and glory. Because we'll sing it face to face. We have immense and eternal joy. That's the sixth faith.

And the last point I would say that I've learned in these 36 years is that God is faithful. He is faithful, brothers. He is faithful. I wish I knew good plans.

God's plans for the next few years is probably good. We don't know God's plans for us. Some of it will be. There will be times of great joy. There will be times of suffering. But I want you to know this.

[41 : 13] In our church, we're 47 years into it now. In 1880, 40 years into it. I can see so many times over and over that God has been so faithful to us. Just faithful. He is faithful to His words, brothers.

He cannot, He cannot, He cannot neglect His word. He cannot, He's going to be faithful to His promises. He cannot deny Himself. What the scriptures say?

Preach Him. Preach Christ. The Father will not deny the Son. That would be the testimony about my life first and the life of living faith. Sure, not that we've been faithful, but that God has been faithful.

And He has been. Amen. I've told you two stories. We've been closed. One story is about a couple. Their first Sunday was the Sunday I got ordained in 1982.

They tell me this. In 30 years. Yeah, we were the first Sunday you're ordained. They came to a couple. Nothing stood out about this couple. They had three daughters. They've experienced joys and sorrows in their life.

[42 : 15] Average church member. Husband came to me and said, What gifts do you think we have in our life? How can we serve in the church after a year or so? What gifts do you have? And what do you think?

I didn't know what to tell him. Just normal folks. I said, well, I did that because I said, I think you both have a gift to serve. I really didn't remember what you said.

And that couple, the husband closed the church every Sunday. He stayed around late. They didn't laugh at our way. Closed the church every Sunday.

He read our book table for all those years. Never would let anybody do a book table besides him. He had to do it, right? After every meal, they went back in the kitchen washing dishes.

We have special meals back to you. We have special meals back there. Washing the dishes until they're done after every meal. We do wedding meals. They're back there both up.

[43 : 11] Washing dishes after the meals. Funerals. Funerals. They're there. Their children are grown up by now. They're an older couple. Everybody's family's funeral's are there. Whenever we don't, they're there.

They're sending cards. She's sending cards. He's sending cards. He ends up getting Parkinson's. And they're getting older. She wants to keep him at home. As last year, they were getting ready for church one morning.

He fell back and fell on her. She rubbed her hip. She's a few. She ends up in the hip surgery. They end up in rehab. They have to put him there as well because he can't live by himself. She's improving while she's there.

At two of these years, she's also sending cards to people. Right. Everything. For everything. She's in there. I go to visit him. I look here on the table. There's a stock of cards.

There's flowers. And because she's reading, sudden people are sending cards and flowers. They're not going to be notified. And she's sitting there in the nursing home. Here's her husband with Parkinson's. She doesn't know she's going to get back. And I look at her.

[44 : 12] I say, hand pullin Jake. She says, is it God so good? And she had surgery on another part. Her hip was getting better. And we're thinking they're not popping up.

Yeah. Because her husband, but she's told her better. And she'll stay with him. She goes in to have another surgery. If something happened after the surgery, they take her to have a hospital. And they put her to go in the hospital. And remember, something happened and she died.

We've been this in the last few months. Great is the reward, Dev. If only the man of this.

The Bible says that those gifts sealed least important are the most important. In our church, this couple were some of the most important gifts ever had. I thank God. I say this, that God is faithful.

Here's a couple. That was a gift to us. That faithfully came. That I'm so glad that we were a church for 37 years so this couple could serve in.

[45 : 10] And have fellowship and have family. We ended up in the family. After 36 years. Brothers, it's worth labor. And we're all down. So then we're burying our fruit.

We are burying our fruit. We are burying our fruit. In our fruit generation now. We had our funeral. And you always ask people, is there others who want to share? You do that. You're all funerals down here.

You have a couple of people sharing that. You say, anybody else want to share? Just share it with all for 45 minutes. To round our lives. There are blessings being in a rural church.

And people are the surplus of all. And everyone knows each other. And people are, that's one story or one tale. The second story I want to say, to share about God's faithfulness is, a couple of Sundays ago, Linda and I, my wife, I would come down to Tennessee to watch grandkids.

Our children would go, they were going on vacation. So we, we would hardly ever miss a Sunday meeting. I had to teach a class before the preaching, but I wasn't really preaching. So we decided we need to leave. It's this long way to go to Lake Montgomery.

[46 : 12] So we left between, left before church started. So we drove home, got all our stuff back and came by the church parking lot. You beat it. How do you? And I'll never get to see the church parking lot.

Cause we were already, we beat late. And we drove by that church. It was a great blessing. I'm sorry, I'm getting a passion. We went by the church parking lot.

It was full of cars. And I just thought how faith God has been to us. 36 years to drive back. We never see the park. But we drove by. There was cars parked here.

There was cars parked here. There was cars parked out. There was cars parked out. I got fucked up. I gave it so good to us to do. In this small town. Yeah. So I said, I'll see the test when it did not faith in us. Brothers, of all these points, the last point, keep me most sure of.

If you preach God's word, you make him central in the life of church. His gospel, Jesus Christ, God is faithful. He'll be faithful to you. I don't know. I don't know what your shoes is going to look like, but you can, you can, you can bank on that.

[47 : 15] The government says it to you. It'd be safe to your life. Thank you. Let's pray. I can pray to you. I'm sorry, I got emotional. Did you expect it again? No, Doc. While you started, was that unexpected?

Yes. Let's pray. Father, you can be there. Father, I pray for every man here. Oh, that you help us, and I sell them too. help us to watch our lives.

Lord, help us to watch our lives and document closely. God, I trust in your word. help us be faithful, man. And preach your word. And preach the gospel. You make the main thing, the main thing of our ministry, which is this wonderful, there's a salvation in Jesus Christ.

All the times of the inexplicable suffering, Lord, I pray that you help us to look at the cross of Calvary. And Lord, see that your love has demonstrated what's for all. Same.

And Lord, for us specifically. Lord, you don't understand what's happening around us, and we'll understand that you love us. And Father, I pray that you can reach me here, each lady here as well, and you'll give us godly friends.

[48 : 23] That will help us through our lives, and that will help us to encourage us. I pray that you will do that for us. We need friends around us, Lord. So give us godly friends, Lord.

We pray, Lord, for as well that you will help us to increase our faith in you. So because you are, you are trustworthy in all these things.

keep us, we pray, we pray that you will, you will bless our folks, as we grow in you. And Lord, I pray for every man here, that you will make his ministry fruitful, fruitful as God is in all the sins, and be faithful in your eyes, for our power, that we might all hear well done, good and faithful start, on that day.

And I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.