

Suffering is not Singular

Connor Bales

Life Lessons | July 12, 2026 | James 1:2; Exodus 2:23-25; Romans 8:16-18; 2 Corinthians 11:23-28; Psalms 34:18-19

Prepared from the spoken message and lightly edited for readability. Scripture quotations and spoken phrasing are preserved as delivered.

Good morning, church. Grab your Bibles. Let's go to Romans chapter 8.

I am truly honored to be here with you today. I love your pastor and his family, and I love the ministry of Champion Forest Baptist Church. As Jarrett mentioned a moment ago, he is my closest friend. You know, the Bible says a brother is born for adversity, and Jarrett's been that friend to me for a long time. I'm so grateful for the ways in which he has served me and our family.

Jarrett and Debbie have walked alongside us through a lot of life. Jarrett helped coach me through my calling out of the business world and into the ministry, and then he was very instrumental in getting me on a church staff for my first opportunity to serve in local church ministry. He continues to be a dear friend and trusted counsel to me as I'm navigating life as a senior pastor.

He and Debbie are also the godparents of my fourth daughter, whom you're going to hear about today. Her name is Hannah. We have, in fact, vacationed with the Stephens, and I have had the privilege of witnessing the life of this family not just from the platform, but off the stage. I just want you to know, Champion Forest, what you already know, which is that God has blessed you with Pastor Jarrett Stephens as your pastor. You are a blessed church.

I also want to say thank you to you, because the ministries of Champion Forest reach so much further than just greater northwest Houston. Quail Springs Baptist Church and so many others like ours are the beneficiaries. Because your church is doing ministry so well and resourcing with such kingdom-mindedness as a faith family, it is impacting churches like ours and others all across the country and even around the world.

For your faithfulness, I want to say thank you. We're the beneficiaries of that. God is using you and what He is doing in you and through you to truly transform places a long way from here. We are so grateful for you.

I'm honored to be here today and to share, as Jarrett said, about something that is a reality for all of us, but something that I have, by God's grace, learned a great deal about how to navigate. That is the difficulty of suffering.

Suffering is nothing that anyone looks forward to, and yet it is a reality that everyone experiences and has to endure. I have not found the person yet who gets through life unscathed. The reality is, we all live in a world that has been fractured by sin. Our world is broken, and the consequences of that brokenness are that we deal with difficulty, calamity, and hardship. We have to figure out how to navigate pain. Everybody deals with suffering. There isn't a person who is able to navigate this life without having to feel some type of pain.

The question for Christ followers is, how do we do it in a way that allows us to maintain our witness for Jesus and maintain fidelity to God? How do we suffer well?

At the end of the day, you would agree that there are a lot of ways to respond to suffering. In fact, if you know the Old Testament story of Job, Job was a man whose life was turned upside down. His life was wrecked. He lost family. He lost all of his finances. His world came crashing down around him.

He had friends who showed up to Job in that moment of despair, and they said, "It's got to be your fault." His wife came to him in that moment of despair and said, "It has to be God's fault." But the Bible tells us that Job's response was, "God gives and He takes, but blessed be the name of God."

I want to suffer well. I want to suffer with a testimony in which my witness for Jesus remains intact.

Fortunately for you and me, the Bible is not silent on the subject of suffering. In Romans chapter 8, the apostle Paul writes this letter to the persecuted church in Rome, and he gives a great deal of real estate right here in the middle of the letter to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

What's fascinating to me is the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the way He works in the life of every believer. When you are born again, when you place your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, the birthday gift God gives to you is Himself. He gives His Holy Spirit, who indwells the life of every follower of Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us in the middle of Romans chapter 8 that one of the ways in which the Spirit works in the life of a believer is that He helps us in our seasons of suffering. He helps us navigate our hardship, difficulty, and pain in a way that allows us to suffer well.

I want to show that to you in God's Word today, and then I'm going to share with you some of the ways that has practically worked itself out in the life of Team Bales. Here's what I can tell you: suffering is not unique to you. It is not unique to me. It is something that we all have to figure out how we are going to navigate faithfully.

Suffering is something the Bales navigate every single day. Jarrett told you a moment ago that my wife, Mary, and I celebrated 26 years of marriage in the last couple of weeks. We have five amazing children and a wonderful son-in-law.

Last December, my daughter Catherine was married. She married a great guy, Luke, and Catherine is finishing her last semester of nursing school. She's married to a great guy who graduated after playing four years of collegiate baseball. He's now a graduate assistant in Dallas, and they have a great life together.

The young man standing next to Luke is my son, Coleman. He is 19 years old. He is a sophomore at Oklahoma Christian University, where he plays college golf. Coleman is a great kid.

The youngest, who is standing next to my bride, is Campbell. Campbell is actually here with us today. She's hanging out with Cameron and Landry Stephens, and she is 12 years old, heading into the seventh grade. Campbell is an unbelievable blessing to Team Bales.

Then you can see the two bridesmaids who are in wheelchairs. They are my daughters Libby and Hannah. Libby is 17 years old, and Hannah is 14 years old. Libby is on the right side of your screen. Hannah is on your

left.

My girls have been diagnosed with a very rare chromosomal abnormality called Trisomy 16p. It was so rare that when we received Libby's diagnosis, we were told there were only 30 known cases in the entire world and that 50 percent of those children diagnosed with it had not outlived their infancy. It is medically incompatible with life.

My girls are chronologically 17 and 14, but developmentally and cognitively, they are nine months old. My girls are medically fragile, and they require full-time, round-the-clock personal care. Yet they have been an unbelievable instrument of God in my life and in the life of my family. Through them, God has shown me how He works in us and through us in some of the most painful seasons entrusted to us.

That's what we're going to see and, I pray, grow in a greater understanding of today.

Romans chapter 8. We're just going to read a few verses. In fact, we'll only concentrate on one. I want you to start with me in verse 16. Follow along in your copy of God's Word. Romans 8:16. If you're there, say, "I got it."

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order
that we may also be glorified with him.*

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be
revealed to us.*

— Romans 8:16-18

"The Spirit Himself" - that's a capital S. That's the Holy Spirit.

I think there are a few realities that you and I, as followers of Christ, need to lean into. Inevitably, we are all going to have to determine how we are going to navigate our seasons of suffering so that we suffer well. As followers of Christ, how is it that we endure our difficulty in a way that still brings honor to God?

I always encourage people to take notes. I like to mark and write in my Bible. I don't know if many of you are comfortable highlighting, marking, and writing in your Bible. If you're not, let me just put you at ease: yours isn't original. It's okay for you to mark and highlight in your Bible.

Suffering Deserves Stewarding

Here's something the apostle Paul draws out for us that I want us to pay attention to today. The first is this: suffering deserves stewarding.

I'm going to show this to you in the text. Look at verse 18:

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be
revealed to us.*

— Romans 8:18

Underline the word "consider." The word in the original language for "consider" can be translated to mean "to think," "to reckon," "to count," "to suppose," or "to weigh."

In other words, Paul is telling us that he believes his suffering is something that deserves stewarding. It is something that must be thought about. It is something that must be paid attention to.

Here's why this matters to us: most of the time, our posture as it relates to pain is that we either want to ignore it and hope it goes away, or we simply want to get through it. We'll forfeit what God might be doing in us and through us through the particular hardship He has entrusted to us, often described as suffering.

The apostle Paul was somebody who was familiar with suffering - really familiar with pain. Paul writes letters to the Corinthian church. Corinth in the first century was a city of great influence, and as the gospel landed there, people of all types of backgrounds were converted to Christ. Yet there were all types of outside influences upon that young church.

When competing thoughts and ideologies began to creep into the church and create confusion, there were some in the church who were saying, "Listen, we don't need to listen to Paul anymore. He doesn't have the apostolic authority to speak truth to us."

Paul writes letters to the church in Corinth, and in addition to instructing them, he has to share with them how it is that he has been given the authority to speak this weighty truth. One of the ways in which Paul validates his authority is that he is someone who has endured suffering, particularly persecution for faithfulness to the person of Jesus Christ.

Here's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 11. He is talking about those who were challenging his authority:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one - I am talking like a madman - with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

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;

on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;

in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

— 2 Corinthians 11:23-28

Paul was a person well-versed in suffering. Paul was a brother familiar with pain. Yet what is it that he tells the persecuted church in Rome? You've got to think about it when it shows up. "For I consider."

Paul says our suffering is not something we need to ignore and somehow hope it goes away. It's not

something we need to simply try our best to get through without paying attention to what God might be teaching us in and through the hardship.

Paul says, "You need to think about it. You've got to pay attention to it because God might actually be doing something in and through you, and it just happens to show up in the form of something that stings."

I grew up in Waco, Texas, and then we moved to Dallas when I was in high school. I grew up in Waco before Chip and Joanna made it cool. I'm old-school.

I remember that before the big-box Home Depots and Lowe's, there was something called Ace True Value Hardware stores. Anybody remember Ace True Value? The people who worked there had red vests. I remember going to Ace True Value, and I thought the red-vest employees knew every answer to every question. It was amazing, because you could ask them, "Hey, where's a screw that's this size?" And they would be like, "It's aisle seven. It's at the top. It's three rows down."

When Dad would take me, I loved going to Ace True Value. One time, he took me and I got to watch the process of a key being cut. Have you ever seen a key being made? It's a messy process.

Here's how it works. You take what is known as the master key, and you lay that down in a key-cutting machine and lock it into place. Then you take the key that is going to be cut and fashioned. It is a loosely defined piece of metal. It has similarities to the master key, but it has not yet been given any definition.

You lay that loose piece of metal on top of the master key, and then a technician will pull a grinding wheel down against that master key. It begins to take the notches out and form and shape the key. If you've watched this process, it's noisy, it's messy, and sometimes sparks are going to fly.

I would argue that's suffering. The Lord Jesus is the Master. Because you and I have been made in His image, we have some similarities. We have a similar shape and mold. But it seems that what God often does is use the grinding wheel of suffering to mold and shape us so that we look more like the Master, Jesus.

Then here's what's fascinating: God uses that to unlock something for us that we would never have known had He not entrusted to us that particular pain.

You've got to pay attention to it. Listen, I'm not saying celebrate it. I'm not saying you have to be happy about it. I'm saying consider it.

Paul says, "For I consider." I think about it. I reckon. I want to weigh what it is that God might be doing in us and through us through this particular hardship, this key of pain He has entrusted to us.

Suffering deserves stewarding.

Suffering Is Not Singular

Here's the second thing Paul draws out for you and me: suffering is not singular, although I sure wish it was.

Here's what Paul says in verse 18:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

— Romans 8:18

Circle the word "sufferings." In the Greek, that word is *pathema*. It can literally be translated as hardship, calamity, or pain. It's in the plural in the original language, meaning the Bible intends for us to understand that suffering is something that happens more than once.

In fact, when James writes his New Testament epistle to the church, he says:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

— James 1:2

That word can mean "to test" or "to try as an experiment," and it is also in the plural form.

It's important that we understand suffering is not like a merit badge. Do you remember, if any of you did Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts growing up, that as you completed a particular task, whatever that task was, you earned a badge? You got that on your vest, and you were able to move on.

Suffering doesn't work like that, although I sure wish it did. I wish whenever you and I discovered for the first time that this world was broken and its consequences showed up, often in the form of difficulty, calamity, hardship, and pain, God would then go, "Hey, you did it. Wear that badge. You're done."

But that's why we talk about suffering in terms of seasons of suffering.

I can tell you what that's looked like for Team Bales, because at this point, we don't count hospital visits in days. We count them in weeks and months. My girls have had more surgeries than I can recall. My daughters still navigate seizures to this day.

During the last hospitalization that Hannah had, she needed an IV for about five days. She was poked nine times. How do you tell a nonverbal child with the cognitive understanding of a nine-month-old baby that we have to hurt you to help you, while I'm holding her arm in place so the vascular team can get access?

But it happens. It doesn't happen once. It's over and over and over again.

Here's why we had better acknowledge that: we're not going to be equipped to steward suffering if we think it's one-and-done when it comes to our pain.

Suffering Is Not Worth Comparing

Suffering deserves stewarding. It is not singular. And it is not worth comparing.

I'll show it to you again. Look at verse 18:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

— Romans 8:18

Underline that phrase, "not worth comparing."

Paul says our suffering in the here and now cannot compare - it's not worth trying to compare - to the one day God has in store for you and me.

But I would argue that there are also some things we need to be cautious about as we face the temptation to compare our suffering in the here and now.

One, I think we have to guard ourselves against trying to compare our suffering to a life without any. Because guess what? We all live in this world that has been fractured by sin, and we're all going to suffer its consequences. Sometimes that's going to show up in the form of suffering.

Sometimes it's a diagnosis. It's disease. Sometimes it's a mental health crisis. It's depression. It's anxiety. Sometimes it's financial stress. It's some type of relational crisis. It's a child or grandchild who is so far from God. Sometimes it's addiction. It's something that has enslaved you, and although you want freedom, you can't seem to find any because you continue to suffer. You continue to navigate this difficulty, hardship, and pain.

Don't compare this life of challenge to a life that doesn't have it, because ultimately, you'll be ill-equipped to steward it when it inevitably shows up.

Here's the second thing I would warn you against: don't compare your suffering to the suffering of someone else.

If I could just love you as a pastor for a moment, I would say, don't compare your pain. You realize there are no trophies or blue ribbons for who has it worse. There are no trophies for who has had it more difficult.

Although I think we would all acknowledge that we've probably met a person who is a one-upper when it comes to comparing pain. Y'all know that person? Often it shows up in the form of a prayer request.

Have you ever had this conversation happen? You're like, "Hey, please pray for me, because I like to work out, but my knee has been swelling, and it's causing me pain. I can't run anymore."

They immediately jump in and say, "Had both knees replaced."

Okay. I'm glad you're upright. Well done.

Or then you say, "Would you pray for my uncle Robbie? You remember I told you about the diagnosis, and he's not necessarily responding to treatment."

They jump right in: "Lost both my uncles."

Okay. I get it.

Some of you are like, "I don't know that I've ever met the one-upper." You might be the one-upper. This is a

word of warning.

But here's the deal, family: if we try to compare how difficult we feel we have it to how easily we perceive someone else does, then we are forfeiting the key God has entrusted to us, and we are minimizing the one He has entrusted to them.

Don't compare your pain. Even though it's tempting to look around, listen: you realize social media is not real. It looks like they have it all. Everybody's jacked up. That's the whole reason Jesus came. We're all struggling.

The question is, are we going to struggle well? Are we going to endure what God has entrusted to us?

Friends, when I say that, I recognize it's a hard pill to swallow. In no way am I minimizing your pain. I wouldn't do that. I get it.

In the last year, since September of last fall, my daughter Hannah, my 14-year-old, has spent 135 days in the hospital. She was released on Thursday of this week. I've spent more nights in the children's hospital in the last year than any person should have to.

My daughter has been poked and prodded, intubated and extubated, over and over and over again. I've had more closed-door conversations with doctors and ICU attending physicians about how far we want to go as it relates to intervention than any parent should have to have.

I would never minimize your pain. By the way, neither does God. He gets it. After all, it was our perfect Father in heaven who watched His only Son suffer for a crime He didn't commit so that you and I could have a relationship with Him forever. He gets it.

You're never going to read the Bible verse that says, "Dust yourself off." You're not going to read the Bible verse that says, "Suck it up. You're going to be fine."

God gets it.

In Exodus chapter 2, there's a great story of Israel under Egyptian captivity. God's people are at their end, and they cry out to God.

God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

God saw the people of Israel - and God knew.

— Exodus 2:24-25

I would say to you today, some of you are wondering, "Does He hear me?" The answer is yes.

Does He remember? Yes.

He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

— Philippians 1:6

He hasn't forgotten about His promise to you.

Does He see you? Yes.

When no one else reaches out, when you feel all alone, when no one's paying attention to your pain, and when no one's talking about your difficulty, God sees. He knows exactly what you need, and He has promised to be there in every moment of every day with whatever hardship, difficulty, and pain you have been entrusted to bear.

*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.*

*Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the Lord delivers him out of them all.*

— Psalm 34:18-19

But in the meantime, you might just have been counted worthy to endure this difficulty for a purpose God is working in you and through you that you might never have known otherwise had He not entrusted it to you.

At least, that's what He's taught me.

I'm going to have Michael and the team come in just a moment and sing a song Michael helped me write as God began to explain this understanding of stewarding our suffering in a really unique way.

I told you that in 2008, when Libby was born, things were challenging immediately upon her delivery. We discovered very early that she had a significant congenital heart defect, and she would need a heart repair.

At 10 weeks old, Libby had that surgery. While she was recovering, the doctors recommended that we have some genetic testing done to ensure there were no other complications we should expect.

In January of 2009, a geneticist in Dallas called us and told us that Libby had a very rare genetic abnormality, Trisomy 16p. She said, "It is technically incompatible with life, and if you had not already had her heart repaired, I would advise against it. Mr. and Mrs. Bales, go home and make your little girl comfortable. She will not outlive her infancy."

That wrecked us. It turned our world upside down, as you can imagine. It was the most difficult news we'd ever had to hear.

When Mary and I got home and began to get our legs underneath us again, we decided that as long as God was entrusting Libby to us, we would give every opportunity to her, and we would seek to see if she could thrive.

We threw ourselves headfirst into seeing specialists and therapists. When Libby reached her first birthday, which was a milestone we weren't expecting, we just went all in even more. In fact, if there is a specialist you can think of in the medical field, chances are we see them.

When Libby reached her second birthday, we realized that God has numbered the hairs on her head. He's marked out the days of her life, and only He is going to determine what kind of life she's going to live.

The doctors had counseled us that it was a mathematical impossibility that we would ever have another child with Trisomy 16p as a genetic abnormality, because it's believed to be the leading cause of miscarriage.

And so we got pregnant.

Mary's pregnancy with Hannah, our fourth, was perfect all the way through. When Hannah was born, she didn't present with the same complications at birth, but Mary and I still had a check and a feeling that we needed to have her tested.

On December 2, 2011, our pediatrician called and told us that the results from the laboratory had returned, and he asked if we could meet.

Mary and I got my mom to come over to the house and sit with our three littles. We loaded Hannah up in her little baby carrier, and we went to the pediatrician's office.

When we went in, the pediatrician had a quiver in his lip, and tears began to fall. He told us that the director of Baylor Laboratories had called him personally and that they had actually, at their own expense, run the genetic testing twice. Because despite the fact that it is a mathematical impossibility, Hannah is a genetic twin of her older sister Libby and has the exact same diagnosis.

We were devastated all over again.

Not for us. To every parent and grandparent in the room, you know that you love your children so much that if God said, "I'm going to give you another one like that," you would be overwhelmed.

We were devastated for her because I knew just how much Libby had already had to suffer and how much Hannah was going to have to endure. Although today, I truly had no idea how hard her life would really be.

The pediatrician was crying. Mary and I were crying. Once we collected ourselves enough that we could leave the pediatrician's office without scaring all the parents who were there for a well visit, we went to the car.

I had Hannah in her little carrier, and I locked it into the base in the back seat. Mary had gotten in the passenger seat. I hopped in to drive, and just before I turned the ignition over, as clearly as I'm speaking to you, God spoke to me and said, "Connor, I have counted you worthy to do this twice."

I couldn't believe it.

I looked over at Mary and said, "I don't think you're going to believe what I feel like God has just said to me."

She said, "I heard it too."

Is life with my girls hard? You bet.

Is it most likely that we're going to outlive them? You bet.

Is tomorrow promised for either one of my girls? Nope.

Has the last year been the hardest year of my life? Yes.

And I can't believe God has counted me worthy to be their dad. I really believe that with all my heart.

Suffering Is for Now, but Glory Is Forever

What Paul says to close verse 18 might be most important to us today. Suffering is for now, but glory is forever.

Listen to what he says:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

— Romans 8:18

Friends, I don't know what you're facing, but God does. Even if it doesn't go away today, tomorrow, or the day after that, I can promise you there is a day when it will be no more.

If you're navigating a marriage crisis, a health crisis, a mental health crisis, a financial difficulty, a fractured relationship, or an addiction that has you in bondage - whatever it is that you are facing, whatever your hardship, calamity, difficulty, and pain - God is with you. He has made perfect provision for you.

John got a vision of that day. He said this in Revelation chapter 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

— Revelation 21:1-3

Now watch verse 4:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more,

neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."

Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

— Revelation 21:4-5

There will be no more Trisomy 16p, no more wheelchairs, no more seizures, no more children's hospitals, and no more pneumonia, for the former things have passed away.

Why would He say, "Write it down," if He didn't know on that day that we would need it for this one, and that we would have a God who is with us for every day in between?

Look up here at me. You can do this. Whatever it is you have been counted worthy to endure, you are not

alone. You have a God who loves you and has made provision for you.

In fact, it was through the greatest form of human suffering that God brought about the greatest good. It was through a bloody wooden cross that sin was forgiven, and we were granted life everlasting with Him.

The worst that this life has to offer is nothing compared to the best that is awaiting us in heaven.

I was called out of the business world into the ministry. It is the privilege of my life to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the greatest two evangelists I've ever met don't say a word. Every room they wheel themselves into, or we wheel them into, they herald the hope of heaven in a way that you and I never could.

On this day, we believe in the God of that day and trust in His promise to walk with us every day in between.

Invitation

I've been watching you all morning wipe tears from your eyes. I know there are some of you in this room who are navigating your own season of suffering. You are navigating your own personal pain.

In just a moment, I'm going to give you an invitation. Here's what's happened all morning long: there have been ministers at the front of the room waiting to receive you and pray over you about whatever difficulty has been entrusted to you.

You will not hear one person say, "Get over it. It's not a big deal. Dust yourself off."

But we will pray and beg God that whatever is out of our control and over our head will rest at His feet.

If you're here today and you don't have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, then guess what? You're navigating this broken world alone, and you don't have to.

Today would be the day when you need to surrender your life, transfer your faith from self and circumstance, and give that over to Jesus Christ. Today is a day of salvation for you.

If you have a need in your life or a way this church can minister to you and come alongside you, this invitation is for you.

I know the heart of your pastor. No one at Champion Forest will walk alone.

I'm going to pray. When I say amen, we're going to stand to our feet, lift our voices, and beg God to move.