

**Fighting Through Suffering**  
**2 Cor. 4:16-18**  
SERIES “Fight”  
**Jarrett Stephens**

So far in our *FIGHT* series, we have covered some things we have to fight for...like our families and truth...we fight for the lost and the least. We’ve talked about fighting against temptation. This week, we are talking about something that we have to fight through.

The message today is: **Fighting through suffering**

Now, this is a topic that is relevant for every person in the room. One of what I call “the certainties” of suffering...I wrote about these in my book, *The Mountains Are Calling*. One of these certainties is that “suffering is universal and unavoidable”.

This message like all in this series is topical so we are going to look at a wide range of Bible verses in this sermon today that speak to this topic of suffering.

I don’t think I need to convince you though that suffering comes in all shapes and sizes and degrees. It doesn’t matter where you come from, what your background is, how much you have or don’t have because of sin and living in a fallen world EVERYONE suffers.

The Bible says that it “rains on the just and the unjust” – (Matt. 5:45). It is a reality in life.

Jesus predicted this in: **John 16:33b** – “...**In this world you will have tribulation** (you will suffer!). **But take heart, I have overcome the world.**”

Now, one of the hurdles to “fighting through suffering” – let’s just be honest and name it, is that while we know we WILL suffer, we don’t know WHY we suffer...and the “WHY” question is one that is really difficult to deal with and is often the one that trips us up as we attempt to fight.

It’s the “WHY” that can really derail us in our faith. A curveball comes...we enter the furnace of affliction and we wonder:

- Why am I having to go through this break in a relationship?
- Why did I get the Doctor’s report that is not in my favor?
- Why can’t we get pregnant and have children?
- Why was my job cut at this point in my career?
- Why is it so humid in Houston?

These are heart-wrenching questions, but it’s also the raw reality of life. And we have to deal with this question, “WHY” if we are going to fight through suffering.

“God, why me? Why now? Why does it feel like you don’t care? Why don’t you do something about this? Why aren’t you answering my prayer? Why?”

Theologian, John Stott writes: **“The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God’s justice and love.”**

So, we need to do our best to answer this question EVEN if the answers that we come up with don’t satisfy – AND full disclosure: in my experience – for those that are going through suffering...especially if you are in the middle of it (present tense) the “WHY” doesn’t really help that much anyway.

Let’s look at it and from a big picture try to tackle: **The WHY of Suffering**

There are two tracks that I want to suggest understanding the “why” of suffering run on. The first track is God’s glory and the second is our faith.

Let’s look first at: **God’s glory**

Two accounts we will look at very quickly. Both come from John’s gospel. Turn first to John 9. I’ll catch you up on the story because we can’t cover it in detail.

There is a man that was blind from birth that Jesus and his disciples were walking past. Jesus’s disciples ask Jesus – why is this man born blind? Was it because he sinned or his parents sinned?

That was the belief of the day. That if you had an ailment or an illness or a handicap it must have been because of sin...you or your parents did something wrong. And Jesus responds to their questions in listen to what he says:

**John 9:3 – “Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”**

Jesus goes on to heal this man, and the man testifies to the goodness of God before the Pharisees who had brought him into questioning.

Listen to the **ESV Study Bible** notes on this verse: **“This indicates that God in his mysterious and wise providence sometimes allows his children to go through hardship and suffering so that they can experience God’s mercy and power in delivering them.”**

Sometimes we are delivered in our suffering and sometimes we are not. Remember John 11? Turn just two chapters over. This is the chapter where Jesus raises his friend, Lazarus from the dead. We won’t read the whole passage but for the purposes of the message today, let’s look at (v. 1-4).

**John 11:1-4 – “Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (Remember, Jesus loved this family!)<sup>2</sup> It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” <sup>4</sup> But when Jesus heard it he**

said, **“This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”**

Now, quick point I want to make in this: What does it do for your theology when the Bible says that someone Jesus loved is ill?!

- Don't listen to those that say for you to follow Christ leads to health and wealth or if you just have enough faith your circumstances will change.
- Don't listen to those that say if you will just have enough faith everything is going to turn out exactly the way you are praying for and hoping for. That is a false gospel...and a false hope.

Suffering is not the exception for the believer it's actually the norm. And here is someone that Jesus loved that is suffering from an illness and dies! Jesus purposely delays in going to Bethany to heal Lazarus and he dies.

And Jesus said his sickness and death (v. 4b) will be used “so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

In God's economy often times his glory is seen MOST in suffering and heartache. Look at the cross. God's greatest glory (resurrection to life) came through his greatest pain (crucifixion and death).

Peter adds something that John doesn't...something almost shocking! Look at:

**1 Peter 4:13-14 – “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”**

The Spirit of glory doesn't show up after the suffering ends! He rests on you in the middle of it. The glory isn't just waiting on the other side of your trial...it's present with you inside it.

And while I don't understand it completely...and certainly don't like it when I'm in it - God's glory is manifested when his people go through suffering (we'll work more of this out in just a moment).

God's glory is the first track to understand the “why” of suffering. In fact, listen: We won't experience the glory of God without experiencing suffering.

**Illus. Kelsey registering for classes** – she had to take some prerequisites before she gets into her major!

Well, a prerequisite for experiencing the glory of God is suffering...and it's not a class any of us like to take, but it's one we can't opt out...no clapping out of this one!

Turn to Romans 8. Now, Paul knew about suffering...his very calling (Acts 9:15-16) has the fact that he will suffer attached to it...and suffer he did!

Read (2 Cor. 11) sometime in your own time alone with God – it’s a brief synopsis on the suffering of Paul. Here is a man that was no fool. He was a Pharisee...schooled in the Old Testament Law. This guy was brilliant. 13 of the 27 New Testament letters were written by him.

Much of our theology – what we believe about God is because of Paul! Romans is his greatest work and Romans 8 is the pinnacle chapter in this letter. It’s essentially a theology of suffering.

Just listen to what he writes: NO suffering, NO glory.

**Rom. 8:16-17 – “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,<sup>17</sup> 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.”**

And then he tells us where suffering comes from!

**Rom. 8:18-22 – “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.<sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope<sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.<sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.”**

So, what we see is that our world is wounded because of sin. It has been subjected to futility...it’s in bondage...and it’s groaning in pain like that of giving birth to a child.

What the Bible is teaching here is that all of creation suffers...not just God’s people, but the entire planet.

Every earthquake we experience...every tornado...every hurricane...every tsunami...that is creation groaning in suffering and saying, “something is not right”! It’s ready to be set free from bondage. Let’s continue reading:

**Rom. 8:23 – “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”**

See, pain and suffering isn’t just global...it’s local in our own hearts and lives! And while all suffering is a result of sin, it’s clear that God uses our suffering for his glory AND that our glory is tied to our suffering.

Our suffering and God's glory are intimately connected. Doesn't mean we like it...doesn't mean we want it...but if you are looking for a "WHY" behind suffering one of the tracks that train runs on is the glory of God.

The second track this "why" of suffering train runs on is: **Our faith**

Suffering does something for our faith though that nothing else can do! It strengthens it...it refines it!

**James 1:2-4 – “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”**

**1 Peter 1:6-7 – “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”**

What is MOST important to God is NOT our comfort...NOT our ease in life...NOT our happiness.

What he is after the most is his glory and the perfection of our faith, and NOTHING perfects, purifies and strengthens our faith as much as suffering – and we ALL know this even if we don't like it!

**Illus. When were you closest to God?** – mass majority would say during a trial...hardship...trouble...crisis...

It's interesting when you read Paul, he doesn't mention much about the "WHY" behind suffering as much as he moves to and centers his argument on the "WHAT" of suffering:

- What it produces...
- What it brings out...
- What it shows others.

We always think about what suffering takes, but think about what it gives!

This is: **The WHAT of Suffering**

**2 Cor. 4:7-9 – “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”**

Notice what suffering does. It takes our strength, but look at what it gives?

## 1. Suffering brings power

We get his power. We may be crushed by what life throws at us but the “surpassing power that belongs to God” belongs to us as well. Paul is saying I may be squeezed and compressed by life’s circumstances...I may be thrown to the ground, but I’m not pinned...God still allows me space to move around – I’ve got his power!

**Illus. Wrestling growing up** – always beat the three count! In Christ, we will always beat the three count!

**2 Cor. 4:10-12** – “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.”

Suffering takes comfort from us...we are given over to death! But look at what is given to us in this – the life of Jesus manifest! Another way to say this:

## 2. Suffering brings purpose

In our suffering we are showing forth Christ! There are some in here that are suffering and your suffering is showing forth Christ and you are helping others in your suffering. We’re called to do this - -to comfort others with the comfort with which we’ve been comforted (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

**Illus. Bales family** – Some of mine and Debbie’s best friends are Connor and Mary Bales. Debbie and mine’s best friends. We met Connor and Mary Bales years ago. Connor was a graduate of Texas Tech and owned a Landscaping Company in Dallas. He was very successful and I was actually discipling his younger brother, Neal.

As I met with Neal, he kept sharing with me about this brother who owned this landscaping company but was sensing a call to ministry and introduced us to one another...and we hit it off. We were about the same age and starting families and we just loved the Bales.

We went on family vacations together...just became friends for life.

When Connor and Mary were having their third child, they could tell something was not right in the pregnancy and when it came time to deliver Libby there was some issues and after doing some genetic testing found out that their little girl had what is called “Trisomy 16” – it’s an extremely rare genetic disorder (30 worldwide) and most pregnancies with this disorder end up in a miscarriage.

Connor and Mary’s did not. The doctor’s said that they would be lucky if Libby lived to be two years old. The doctor told them her condition was “incompatible with life”.

A couple of years after Libby, they got pregnant again, their doctor telling them that the chances of having another baby with “Trisomy 16” would be scientifically impossible.

I'll never forget the call on October 31 to come to the Bales house and sure enough sweet Hannah, who is Debbie and my "goddaughter" was diagnosed with the exact same genetic disorder.

We've watched these two girls grow up...here's a picture of them today

Our family loves this family, and we love these girls, and I can tell you – watching Connor and Mary take care of these sweet girls – it's amazing to watch!

Connor will be preaching for me a weekend in July. His family and ministry are one of the main reasons we relocated and expanded our special needs suite to off our Great Hall.

Connor and Mary will tell you, it has not been easy, but they have found purpose in their suffering. Look at:

**2 Cor. 4:13-15 – “Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak,<sup>14</sup> knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.<sup>15</sup> For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”**

### **3. Suffering brings perspective**

Paul actually quotes from Psalm 116 here. It's a psalm that was written from the depths of suffering and it seems the writer experienced a near death experience...and in this experience he speaks defiantly of his faith – even though I am afflicted, I believe!

He was brought to a point of an almost gritting of the teeth...I'm not going anywhere!

Paul comes to the same place – beaten, stoned, left for dead (2 Cor. 11) - He understand that as more people hear about his suffering and his faith in suffering, the more people believe and give thanks resulting in God getting more and more glory – so, he grits his teeth and in faith says something in suffering, he would never say in comfort – a resolved, “I'm not going anywhere!”

So, the perspective changer is, “God, if my suffering brings you more glory” then so be it! Let's go through the cancer...let's walk through the dark night...let's stand strong with death surrounding me - THIS is faith on display.

Speaking of perspective. Look at:

**2 Cor. 4:16-18 – “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.<sup>17</sup> For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,<sup>18</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”**

Important to note: all suffering is temporary. Paul describes it as “momentary”. I know if you are in it, it doesn’t feel that way, but all suffering has a time limit...as Peter says in (1 Peter 1:6) it’s just for a “little while”.

And the suffering?! It’s not worth comparing to the glory we will one day experience.

Paul uses a double superlative here...literally (v. 17) reads “far more exceeding” – “beyond all comparison” – he’s reaching for language to describe the difference between present suffering and future glory.

He’s not living for the seen, but for the unseen! He may be suffering in the present, but it’s the eternal that is getting him through – that’s perspective!

Are you losing heart in your suffering? Don’t beat yourself up...I’d just ask where are your eyes? Paul says, “we don’t lose heart” ...our suffering may take some things from us, but it also brings with it power and purpose and perspective.

So, we’ve seen WHY we suffer to a degree...could never fully grasp it or understand it. We’ve seen the WHAT of suffering.

If you are going through it then like Paul...like Connor and Mary Bales – don’t just survive your suffering. Let it bring a power you never knew you had...find in it a purpose bigger than your pain. And let it give you a perspective that this world could never produce.

Let’s look as we close at: **How we fight through suffering?**

Let me give you a statement to start this application that was given to me one time and I’ve preached this at funerals and probably in a sermon a time or two...it’s gold for fighting through suffering.

Here it is: **Don’t trade what you know for what you don’t know**

In suffering, this is the temptation, isn’t it? We lose our minds letting it run after worst-case scenarios that only produce fear and panic. We run to web MD...and we start trading what we know for what we don’t know...and it cripples us!

If we are going to fight through suffering, you have to concentrate on what you KNOW.

So, in closing let me give you what I’m calling some “Romans 8 Certainties”

### **1. God is not condemning you – fight to believe this!**

Sometimes when we suffer, the Enemy wants us to think that our suffering is because God is judging us or condemning us – that’s not true.

We will reap consequences for decisions we make...and sometimes those consequences are severe! The Bible is clear that God disciplines those he loves (Heb. 12:5-6).

But our suffering is not sent by a punitive God bringing judgment. He dealt with our sins in a punitive way at Calvary – this is the beauty of the gospel!

God will use suffering as a tool to refine our faith, but he does not send it as a tool to punish us for our sins. He sent Jesus for that!

So, when you find yourself suffering. Yes, ask the Holy Spirit to search you. Is what we are going through a consequence of our own sin or someone's sin against us? If so, we confess, we confront it and change where necessary.

But what you may be going through could just be the result of living in a fallen world. God is NOT condemning you; he loves you. This is a Romans 8 certainty, and you have to fight to believe it!

**Rom. 8:1 – “There is therefore now (present tense) no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

**Illus. Battle for the mind!**

**2. God is praying for you – fight to rest in this!**

This is an amazing thought!

**Rom. 8:26-27 – “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”**

Now, I don't know what all this means, but I take it to mean exactly what it states. That when we don't know what to pray, the Spirit of God prays for us...he intercedes.

When you are in such pain you don't know what to pray, take confidence and KNOW – don't trade this for what you don't know – you can KNOW God is praying for you, and when you rest in this it brings incredible comfort.

**Illus. Prayer room at home church**

**3. God is working on your behalf – fight to trust this!**

Look...he's not just working a plan...he is working a plan for good!

**Rom. 8:28 – “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”**

Whatever it is you are going through, he is working for your good! We don't have to wonder about this or question this...it's a promise...a certainty from right here in Romans 8.

And btw – you know what this says – the fact that God is working – that he hasn't forgot you!

**Illus. Joseph** – 13 years between being sold into slavery and time in prison! (Gen. 50:20) – “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...”

This is sometimes what we think in suffering...that God has forgotten us! He hasn't forgotten you! Are you kidding me...he is working his plan for your life, and it may not be on the timetable that you like, but don't think for a moment he has forgotten you – you have to fight to trust this because everything in you sometimes is going to want to believe the opposite. He hasn't forgotten you – he can't! You know why? Certainty #4.

#### **4. God loves you – fight to remember this!**

**Rom. 8:35, 37-39 – “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? (that's A LOT of suffering...will this separate us from God's love?) ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Romans 8 starts with no condemnation and ends with no separation. What a great promise from scripture. God loves you and “in Christ” is eternally FOR you.

Don't doubt God's love in tough times, stand in it and know that he is building your faith and working in your life for his glory.

When we suffer...how do we fight through it? Don't trade what we know, for what we don't know. What God has shown us in the light, we don't doubt in the dark!

Let's pray together.

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