

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 6: Fighting for Faith (Part 1)**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

***Struggling for faith in God’s sovereignty and goodness***

**Introduction**

When I was just out of college, a dear Christian friend was struggling through a very stubborn and dark depression. And at one of the lowest points of that struggle, he called me one day to tell me that he was done and ready to end his life. As in, right then that evening. I pleaded with him not to—to check into the ER, to call his pastor, to pray, to read the Bible. “Read the Bible,” he said? “That’s all you ever tell me to do, and it doesn’t do any good. I’ve been reading, I’ve been praying, I’ve been talking, and it’s not helping. I’m done. Reading the Bible isn’t going to help.”

“Please,” I said, “open the Bible and read. It’s God’s word. It changes us. Please. Read it.”

“OK,” said my friend. “You give me a chapter to read, and I’ll read it. And if it feels as cold and dead as it did last time I read it, I’m going to close my Bible, get in my car and drive off a cliff. I mean it.”

And I knew he meant it.

“You can’t treat God that way,” I said. “You can’t just tell him what to do. Jesus says not to put him to the test.”

“I don’t think you believe what you’re saying,” my friend responded. “You say that the Bible is God’s word and has power to change, but you don’t really think it can help me, do you? So you want me to read it but you also want me to do all this other stuff, just in case. You’re telling me what you’re supposed to tell me, not what you really believe. I don’t think you believe the Bible any more than I do.”

And in that moment, I think both of us were right. Yes: this was a terrible idea. We should never decide to sin against God if he doesn’t jump through the hoop that we’re holding up. But at the same time, I was terrified to let the Bible be the only thing between my friend and suicide.

I didn’t know where my friend was; I didn’t know what to do. I relented. “OK. You read through Romans 8, and then call me back.” “Fine. I’m going to read Romans 8, and unless something happens, this will be the last you hear from me.”

Click.

I remember I was walking down 7th Street at the time, just a few blocks away. I sat down in tears, pleading with God to do something through his word. Anything. “Lord, speak!” “In your mercy, please speak!”

And a few minutes later, my phone rang again. Now it was my friend who was in tears. The word that had seemed so cold for so many weeks and months had suddenly come alive. And he was alive. His faith was alive.

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.” That’s really the only thing I have to communicate this morning. Romans 10:17. It’s at the top of our website, our bulletins, our directory, your handout—pretty much every piece of paper that comes out of our church. Faith comes by hearing.

Every spark is faith is a miracle of the Spirit of God—but it’s not like other miracles, because God has told us the normal way he works this miracle: through his Word.

Suffering is a battle for faith, isn’t it? The core of my suicidal friend’s struggle was a question. “Can I trust that this horrible experience is God’s goodness for me—or do I need to take things into my own hands?” Is God good? How do you answer “yes” all the time? In suffering, you need faith. More than relief, more than comfort, more than security…we need faith.

Now, today’s class is likely to be both an epiphany and a disappointment. It’s disappointing because what I have to say is so unremarkable. You’re struggling through the worst crisis of your life and you come to me and say, “help me, pastor! What can you give me?” And I say, “read the Bible.” Just like I told my friend. Really? Is that all we have?

And yet I hope this class is an epiphany because of that very simplicity. Suffering is a battle for faith. All suffering is a battle for faith. But faith is a miracle, isn’t it? So what hope do we have in these times of suffering that a miracle will happen? Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.

J.I. Packer explains, “If I were the devil, one of my first aims would be to stop folk from digging into the Bible…I should do all I could to surround it with the spiritual equivalent of pits, thorn hedges, and man traps, to frighten people off.[[1]](#footnote-1)” Distract us, get us busy, make us to think we’re *too* hurt to turn to God’s Word and the battle’s already lost. So this morning we begin two weeks on the battle for faith. Next week, we’ll think of what it looks like to fight for faith together in the community of the local church; this week our focus will be fighting for faith on your own. And to do that we’ll cover four categories of what we can do to fight for faith by ourselves in the midst of suffering: Read the Bible, Pray the Bible, Remember the Bible, Sing the Bible .

**I. Read the Bible**

If faith comes by hearing God’s word, then reading Scripture is obviously important. But as Packer points out, there are all sorts of things that get in the way—and especially during times of difficulty. Let’s look at three things that keep us from reading—or reading well—and what we can do about them.

1. Protect against rote duty

One of the things that can really hamper our lives as Christians is when we read the Bible simply because we feel we ought to read the Bible. Now, don’t misunderstand me—self discipline is a good thing. I don’t always *feel* like reading the Bible, and I read it anyway. But *disciplined* is different from *rote*. Let’s say your dentist tells you to floss your teeth each night and you do—but half-heartedly. What happens? You still get the cavities. Because simply having “flossing” on your schedule doesn’t mean you’re getting anything out of it.

The greatest protection against Scripture reading as perfunctory is a sense that we need it. So suffering can actually help you understand how much you need God’s word. How does that work?

One good thing to do is to rewrite your job description for each day. Let’s say that your adult son is walking away from the faith and making all kinds of poor choices. It’s 6am and you just woke up. What’s your goal for the day? At first glance, that might seem like a simple question. Get ready for the day, get to work, do your job well, be an encouragement to your friend at lunch, go to small group, get dinner with a friend, hope for better news from your son, pray for him, go to bed. But if God intends all things for our good, what is *his* goal for you today? He wants to remake you in the image of his son. He wants to increase your dependence on him. He wants to build your faith. He will use this struggle with your son to do that.

Now, you *may* be able to accomplish all of *your* goals on your own. But they’re not really accomplishing anything that will last, are they? What about God’s goals? Can you accomplish them on your own? Absolutely not! The more you realize what lofty goals he has for you, the more you will feel the need to be rooted in *his* truth and in *his* reality. Which will lead to your feeling a desperation to get into the Word.

1. Protect against busyness

If you want to read the Bible well and regularly, you need a plan. Now, for some of us in this type-A city, that seems like a no brainer. For others, we cringe at the idea. *Why not just be free and let it happen?* But when life gets busy, we all succumb to the tyranny of the urgent and end up ditching what’s most important. A plan serves us well because it guards what is crucial and helps us to say “No” to the distractions of the moment.

*When?* Choose the time when you are at your best. Jesus met with his Father early in the morning (Mark 1:35), and unless there’s some compelling reason to the contrary, that would seem to be a good model.

*Where?* Somewhere free of distractions.

*What?* In one sense, this doesn’t really matter. With a little knowledge of Scripture, you can open up anywhere and profit. But protect against playing “Bible Roulette”—read through the Bible as it was written, working your way through large chunks of Scripture. I find that reading the passage being preached the next week is a wonderful discipline: it prepares me for the sermon and takes the guess work out of what I should study. Or you might use a Bible reading plan like you see on your handout.

1. Protect against exhaustion.

I wonder if you’ve been exhausted in the Bible before. When you open it, it seems cold and dead. Especially when we’re in times of suffering and we feel numb to the world, it can be really hard to engage with Scripture. How do we protect against this? First, pray. Before you read, pray that God would “open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your law” (Psalm 119:18). Second, pray. Pray through the passage you’re studying, looking for things to praise God for, things to thank him for, things to pray for, things to confess. Third, pray. When you finish, pray that having listened to his Word, you would be changed. And fourth, read. Especially in times of difficulty, using something someone else has written as a guide to studying Scripture can be really helpful. Things like Don Carson’s daily devotions called “For the Love of God” or Keri Folmar’s workbook on Philippians or Jim Boice’s published sermons on Romans. When we’re feeling weak, a helping hand can be a wonderful help.

**II. Pray the Bible**

In Ephesians 1, Paul prays “that the *eyes of your heart may be enlightened* in order *that you may know* the hope to which he has called you.[[2]](#footnote-2)” Why? Because “if God does not open our hearts to the word of God, we can read it a hundred hours a week and never see the glory of what it says and the one who gave it[[3]](#footnote-3).” So we should not only read the Bible, we should *pray* the Bible – especially in the middle of a trial. Any time we are meditating on Scripture, it’s a good practice to consider what we’re reading and in response, pray. A helpful acronym to remember what to pray is ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Here’s how ACTS applies when we’re hurting:

*Adoration*

What do you see in the text that you can praise God for? This may seem like an odd thing to do when we’re hurting, but having a big view of God is essential for facing big problems.

*Confession*

When we’re suffering, there is a promise in **James 4** that is precious: “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (**v. 8**). Isn’t that what we need when we’re suffering? So how do we “come near to God?” In James, the answer is repentance. He goes on to say, “Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (**v9-10**). Many times, the hardship we’re facing is God’s loving discipline to make us holy – so we do well to examine our hearts and align them with God’s. But even when our suffering is simply the result of living in a fallen world, we may be responding poorly. So are you angry? Understand why, and grieve over the sin at its root. Despondent? Same thing. In times of suffering, we may feel life is hard *enough* without staring at our sin. But if we are praying the Bible, we will pray passages like James 4 that lead us to repentance.

*Thanksgiving*

When we’re suffering, thanksgiving is hard to come by. And yet it’s so important. Think of Paul’s words in **Philippians 4:6**, “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Why thanksgiving? Because what we need is not just relief but trust. When we slow down and thank God for his goodness we can see, it helps us have faith in the goodness we can’t yet see.

*Supplication*

Supplication is another word for request. Whatever our suffering, we should always ask God for wisdom to respond well[[4]](#footnote-4), grace to obey, and relief from our suffering. God’s promise is to always give us what is good[[5]](#footnote-5).

*Praying the Psalms*

In the Psalms, God has given us models for our prayers. As we pray with these great saints, our response can be both heartfelt and God-honoring. When you’re suffering, it’s tempting to gripe rather than to pray. So praying through the Psalms is a great way to guide your prayer life.

How does this look? Let me give you a suggestion and you can make it an assignment this week:

* + 1. Choose a Psalm to pray through[[6]](#footnote-6).
    2. For at least 4 days out of the next week, set aside 15 minutes during your day (make sure to schedule it!). Read through the Psalm in its entirety, reflect/meditate on it, then spend time praying through each line of the Psalm.
    3. If you’re having trouble knowing how to pray through the Psalm, use the questions I’ve put in your handout[[7]](#footnote-7).

**III. Remember the Bible**

Have you ever noticed in the Bible how often we’re commanded to remember? In Deuteronomy, the people are commanded to *remember* lest they forget what God had done for them[[8]](#footnote-8). The church is given the Lord’s Supper to celebrate *in remembrance* of Jesus[[9]](#footnote-9). The apostle Peter writes, “I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of *reminder*[[10]](#footnote-10).” It’s not enough just to read the Bible, we need to remember what it says! So, four thoughts on remembering.

* + - 1. **Memorize God’s Word – Psalm 37:31** says, “The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.” Memorizing passages of Scripture is a great way to have it on your heart with you *wherever* you are[[11]](#footnote-11).
      2. **Take Command of Your Thoughts** – The writer in Psalm 42 was under extreme duress. But in the psalm we find him fighting for faith, fighting to hope in God. One of the things he does is preach to himself. In **v5**, he says, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.” Who’s he talking to? His soul! Lloyd Jones in his book *Spiritual Depression* writes,

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them but they are talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday…Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man’s treatment [in Psalm 42] was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. “Why art thou cast down, O my soul?” he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says,: “Self, listen for moment, I will speak to you.” (*Spiritual Depression*, 20-21)

* + - 1. **Let Someone Listen**

We’ll touch on this again next week, but so often in difficult times, we *know* what to do already. We know where our hearts are believing lies about God. We know what thoughts we need to banish from our minds. We know we need time in God’s word. It’s just that we don’t want to. Sometimes the best thing to do is to talk with a friend who’s willing to listen. As we talk, we’ll find ourselves explaining to the other person what we need to do to have faith in God. And then we do it.

* + - 1. **Let Someone Talk**

Along those lines—don’t let that conversation be one-sided. One of the best things for your faith is to hear about someone else’s faith. Ask a friend who’s doing well what God is doing in her life right now. Ask what they’re seeing in their times in the word. Ask him how he’s encouraged in his faith. Be a faith leach and latch on to the faith of those who can see more clearly than you can right now.

**IV. Sing the Bible**

How does singing awaken faith? Suffering well means not only submitting our will and our understanding to God’s purposes, it involves aligning our affections as well. Jonathan Edwards explains,

The duty of singing praises to God seems to be given wholly to excite and express religious affections. There is no other reason why we should express ourselves to God in verse rather than in prose and with music, except that these things have a tendency to move our affections.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We see this in the Psalms. Go back to **Psalm 42**. “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” His plea for life is through song; and this is how God moves him from despair to hope.

Singing can help us remember the truth about God - which makes *what* we sing all the more important. So when you’re singing for faith, make sure you’re singing *the Bible.* Practically, one thing you could do is to take your song sheet home from Sunday morning/evening, pick one song to sing throughout the week as part of your personal or family devotions. If you’re looking to download good music, there are a number of places online with Bible-saturated and God-honoring music (listed on handout[[13]](#footnote-13)). Talk to Christians who have suffered, and quite often it is the truth of Scripture captured in song that has proved most central to their struggle for faith.

**Conclusion**

OK—Look over your handout and you’ll see a kind of playbook for struggling for faith during suffering. *Read* the Bible – having a plan to do so. *Pray* the Bible—praising, confessing, thanking, asking; even using the Psalms. *Remember* the Bible as you memorize, preach the gospel to yourself, and consider God’s faithfulness in the past. *Sing* the Bible, to align our affections with the truth about God. All of this helps to give us faith so we can wait patiently. Suffering moves slowly. Relief can come slowly. But, as the Psalmist says, “none who wait for you shall be put to shame” (**25:3**). I promise you, he has good in mind for every minute that goes by as you wait for his relief.

**Q & A**

1. Forward by J.I. Packer in *Knowing Scripture* by R.C. Sproul [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eph. 1:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/holding-fast-the-word-of-life-in-2010> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ja. 1:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matt. 7:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Could be any of the Psalms, but for example: Psalm 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 16, 19, 23, 25, 27, 40, 42-43, 55, 62, 63, 84, 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *What does this tell me about God; what does it reveal about him?*

   *If he is really like this, what difference does this particular truth make to how I live today?*

   *What wrong behavior, harmful emotions, false attitudes result in me when I forget he is like this?*

   *Does my life demonstrate that I am remembering and acting out of this?* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Deut. 4:9, 15-16, 19, 23, 39; 8:2, 11, 14, 18-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1 Cor. 11:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 2 Pet. 1:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Piper writes, “My own conviction is that a hundred – I dare say a thousand – problems will be solved in your life by memorizing Scripture…*before* the problem ever comes.” *When I Don’t Desire God* pg. 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in *Worship Matters* by Bob Kauflin, pg. 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sovereign Grace Ministries (<http://sovereigngracemusic.org/>); Keith and Kristyn Getty (<http://www.gettymusic.com/>); Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) <http://www.igracemusic.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)