

Sermon Transcript from June 12th, 2016
Man's Search for Meaning
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You read this a few weeks ago, hopefully, in your read through of the Bible. Bu, let's circle back and read it again.

Jesus, we just ask You to come and do something really beautiful tonight. Even as we move into prayer after this, we just pray for the Holy Spirit to really do something special and unique.

Job 23:1: "Then Job replied:

"Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand [God's hand] is heavy in spite of my groaning [my pain; my angst]. If only I knew where to find God; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

"I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me. Would he vigorously oppose me with great power? No, he would not press charges against me. There the upright can establish their innocence before him, and there I would be delivered forever from my judge.

"But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold."

Let's read that one more time.

"He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold."

Let's start of with a quote that does a great job of capturing the zeitgeist of the human condition.

"Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling you something."

Any of you around in the 80s? Do you remember that? Those of you that are under – it was 1987, so whatever that age is. I suck at math. You have no idea what you missed out on. Praise Jesus for Netflix and iTunes. Go watch it tonight, alright? That's the legendary Dread Pirate Roberts from one of the best films of all time, The Princess Bride. If you don't know, now you know.

All humor aside, there's actually a really profound truth in there. Life is pain. The reality is that we live on the other side of the Garden of Eden debacle in a world that has been unhinged from all that God originally had in mind. And, because of that, we all face pain and suffering at some point in our life. Nobody, not one of you, is immune no matter how wealthy you are or educated you are or smart or savvy or how much you juice or take a vitamin D capsule. All of you, myself included, at some point – it's not an "if," it's a "when" – face pain and suffering.

Tim Keller writes this: "No matter what precautions we take, no matter how well we have put together a good life, no matter how hard we have worked to be healthy, wealthy, comfortable, with friends and family and successful with our career, something will inevitably ruin it. No amount of money, power and planning can prevent bereavement, dire illness, relationship betrayal, financial disaster or a host of other troubles from entering your life. Human life is fatally fragile and subject to forces beyond our power to manage. Life is tragic."

Thanks for that pep talk, Tim. That was great. Those of you here that are just a little down, I'm just here to pick you up tonight, you know? Now, I know that some of you – my guess is a lot of you – are in a great spot in life right now. It's a gorgeous day outside, school's out for the summer, the best is yet – I mean, in the words of my new favorite artist, Chance the Rapper, "My life is perfect, I could merch it. If I die, I'll probably cry at my own service."

So, some of you feel that way tonight. And, by the way, yes. I just quoted The Princess Bride, Tim Keller and Chance the Rapper in two minutes. And this is just the intro,

people, this is just the intro. So, some of you, you're in that spot right now and I honestly don't want to rain on your parade tonight. But, here's the hard truth: we all fall into one of three categories. Either you're in a season of hardship right here and right now, whatever that is. Major or minor. Or somebody that you know – and hopefully love and care about – is in a season of hardship. A family member, a close friend or a coworker or someone in your missional community or here at Bridgetown. I'm sure somebody around you is up against it. Or, for the three of you that don't know anybody in pain right now, you or somebody you know will be in a season of hardship in the not too distant future.

So, the question that I kind of want to chase after tonight is, you know, if suffering is inevitable, there's just no way around it. To be human is to experience pain. Then the question is how do we suffer well? And, honestly, what I have for you tonight is less about technique – although there is some stuff at the end that I want to get into – but more about worldview. About how we think about and how we come at and how we approach a time of hardship in our life.

So, to frame up tonight, there are five major worldviews on pain and suffering. This is where Tim Keller was really helpful for me. And, those of you that see Star Wars, just stay with me. It's coming. First off is the Hindu worldview. On the street, it's called "karma." The basic idea is that you get what you deserve and you deserve what you get. Or, put another way, "What goes around comes around."

The idea is hardship is the byproduct of your own bad decisions. And, if you're Hindu, not only in this life, but often in a former life. Now, another worldview that is in the east is the Buddhist worldview. Think all things "zen." The basic idea here is that all pain and suffering are the byproduct of desire. So, the theory – at least in the teachings of Buddha – is that if you eliminate desire, if that's even possible, then you, by default, eliminate suffering. So, you do this with the four noble truths of Buddhism. One: all of life is suffering. Two: the cause of suffering is desire. Three: suffering ends only when desire is extinguished. Four: this can be achieved by following the eightfold path to enlightenment.

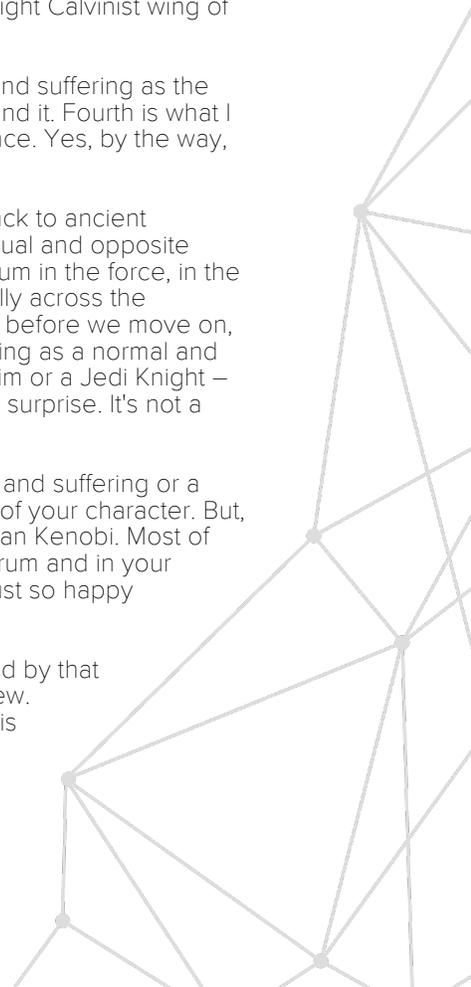
So, that's a more popular than ever before view. Third is the Islamic worldview, which has a high view of fate or destiny or the basic idea here is that everything that happens, it's your fate; it's your destiny. Good or bad, it is the "will of Allah." You also see this in ancient Pagan religions. In particular, in the Nordic and European religions. You see – not to step on toes – a permutation of this in the hard right Calvinist wing of the Church, in my humble opinion, such as John Piper's thing last week.

In sociology, this kind of broad view is called the fatalistic view, because it sees pain and suffering as the byproduct of fate or destiny or the will of Allah or the will of God. There is no way around it. Fourth is what I call the Star Wars view, and that's because the technical term is really hard to pronounce. Yes, by the way, Star Wars is a religion. No, I am not a Jedi Knight... yet.

But, in all seriousness, in sociology, this view is called the dualistic view and it goes back to ancient Zoroastrianism. The basic idea is that the world is a cosmic battlefield between the equal and opposite forces of good and evil; light and dark. And you always need a balance or an equilibrium in the force, in the cosmos. And pain and suffering, in this view, are the byproduct of that war that is literally across the universe. Now, each of these four world views has a ring of truth in it. Right? Yes. And, before we move on, notice what all four of these worldviews have in common. They all see pain and suffering as a normal and necessary part of the human experience. So, if you're a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Muslim or a Jedi Knight – if you are, by the way, let's hang out after. But, then you expect pain to come. It's not a surprise. It's not a shock. It's not a, "Really? What?"

No. You expect it to come. Not only that, but all four worldviews create space for pain and suffering or a season of hardship in your life to be a good thing, bare minimum, in the development of your character. But, here's the thing: most of us here tonight are not Hindu or Buddhist or Islamic or Obi-Wan Kenobi. Most of us – and, if you are, we're so happy that you're here. Wherever you're at on the spectrum and in your faith journey and whatever you believe about Jesus and the Kingdom of God, we're just so happy you're here. This is a really safe place for you.

But, most of us fall into a fifth worldview and that is the, for the most part, Western – and by that I don't mean "white," I just mean the Western kind of way of thinking – secular worldview. And it's very different from all of the above. It's based on the idea of naturalism, which is not only a science, it's also a philosophy of life. The idea that human beings and the world itself evolved without the help of God. So, here, I don't mean evolution or



whatever you think about that. Theistic evolution is a whole thing. There are all sorts of smart, intelligent followers of Jesus that have no problem connecting Genesis 1 and 2 and the idea of a creator God with theistic evolution. That's not what I'm saying at all. I mean "Evolution" with a capital "E." Those that think everything around you is the byproduct of chance. It is a glorious accident. There's no God. There's no creator. There's no meaning or purpose behind the universe.

In this worldview, everything that you see and touch and taste and feel and experience is all an accident. There is no meaning, there is no purpose behind pain or suffering, there is no purpose or meaning behind life. It just is. I think of the famous line from Richard Dawkins:

"The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation."

He's right about that.

"In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it; nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good. Nothing but pitiless indifference."

This is the worldview that we grew up with and most of us were educated into. Now, this is compounded in America even more than in the rest of the West and in Europe by the fact that our nation in particular is essentially a social experiment built around the end goal of life, liberty and the pursuit of what?

You've got to love it. I'm reading John Adam's biography right now. Very slowly, because it's a thousand pages. And it's really good, but really boring. He was the one that put that down on paper. And it's so fascinating, even his language. Life? We guarantee you that. Liberty? We guarantee you that. Happiness? Good luck. Chase after that. Have fun. But, interesting. Here we are, hundreds of years later, you ask most people on the street, "Hey, what is the meaning of life," or, "What is the purpose of life," or, "What's the whole point of living?"

Most people would say, "To be..." – what? – "...happy."

Most people. Most of our family, most of our friends, people that are our roommate, people in our apartment complex. Whatever. Most people would say, "Oh, the point of life is to be happy."

But, if you think about it, this generates a colossal problem for Americans in particular who bump up against pain and suffering. Here it is: if the point of life is life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, then what do you do when you don't have life? You come down with a diagnoses. "I'm so sorry. It's inoperable. You have a year to live. Six months to live. Two years to live. Three. Whatever."

Or somebody close to you – a spouse, a parent, a child, a loved one, a husband, a wife, somebody close to you – dies. What do you do then? What do you do when you don't have liberty? When you're put in jail or you're a refugee or you're hiking in the mountains next to Iran or North Korea and you're abducted by a hostile government or it's WWII and you're in a concentration camp? What about then? Or the pursuit of happiness. What about when your life is just a string of failure after failure and you're still living in the chaos that is the aftereffect of one or two or three bad decisions from when you were in high school?

What about when your life is marked by heartache? What about when you come down with a chronic illness? What about betrayal? What about divorce? What about adultery? What about you fill in the blank? What then? Do you see the problem? This is why most sociologists point out that in the line-up, the Western secular worldview is the worst at dealing with pain and suffering. Because, to the Western mind, at best, pain and suffering are an interruption to the whole point of life.

"Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

So, at best, it's an interruption. I'm going to have a year off the point of life or two years or until I get through this disease or until I get through college or until I get through this job I hate or until I land a much better job or until I'm not single anymore and I have a spouse. Whatever your thing is. It's an interruption between you and the meaning of your life. Or, at worst, the pangs of pain and suffering are an insurmountable obstacle. Anything that's

permanent that will never go away. You're stuck in it forever. Well, that means you can never actually achieve the point of life.

So, in the West – of course it comes as no surprise – we do everything in our power to avoid hardship. Put your seat belts on. We learn that at a really early age. Air bags. It used to be one or two. Now it's like 29 of them. And we have insurance for everything. Car insurance and motorcycle insurance and renter's insurance and home insurance and health insurance and disability insurance and you're annoying insurance. Insurance for everything. And you have your daily vitamin and your organic, whole, natural juice and vitamin D and essential oils, of course. And that's all great stuff. If you know me, I'm actually into kind of all that stuff. But, it's all great because we can, to a degree, minimize and mitigate hardship in our life.

The Western society has done a fantastic job of cutting back on death and injustice and pain and racism and disease and poverty. Fantastic job. But, here's the deal: at some point, pain and suffering slip through the cracks into your life. It's inescapable. Nothing is foolproof. And so, often, then we're just at a loss. We just don't, in the West, know how to deal. So, we just medicate, we go to the doctor, we get a pill. Or we just get over busy, we work extra hours or play extra hours or we're never alone and we're always with people and we never think deeply because we can't go there.

Or we escape to our distraction of choice. An alcoholic beverage, a substance, a rhythm of life, binge a TV series on Netflix. I read the other day – I could not believe this – that the average season on Netflix takes people four days to watch. Like, what? That's average. That was like most people. I've been on West Wing for like four years and I'm still – how much time do you people have? It's just insane. That's a whole... I digress.

So, you escape to whatever your distraction of choice is. Because, often, we just can't deal with it. You see this – not to step on toes – with the explosion of drug treatment for sadness over the last few decades. And, out of that, the exponential growth of mental illness in the U.S., which is a huge – I'm into it. I've read the literature or at least a lot of it. I get that it's a huge topic of debate and controversy right now. I know that from experience. But, I found it really interesting. There's a psychiatrist that some of you, I'm guessing, have read named Dr. Robert Spitzer, who headed up the task force that, in 1980, wrote DSM 3, which is like the handbook for the American Psychiatric Association. So, now I think – I was at my therapist the other day and he had DSM 5 on his desk. So, we're past it, but DSM 3 was kind of the one that reshaped the typography of the American therapeutic landscape from the ground up.

Spitzer and his team in that year, 1980, added all sorts of new mental disorders to the list to explain grief, sorrow, anxiety and stuff like that. But, it was really interesting. In an interview in 2007 – it was kind of a bombshell moment upwards of three decades later – He kind of came out and he basically said that what he and his team did, in hindsight, he had all this regret. And he said we "medicalized much ordinary human sadness."

He said this in an interview: "We were not interested in understanding the patient's life or why they were suffering from these symptoms. If the patient was very sad, anxious or unhappy, then it was simply assumed that he or she was suffering from a disorder that needed to be cured rather than from a natural and normal human reaction to certain life conditions that needed to be changed. The growing influence of the DSM was one among many other social factors spreading..." – listen – "...the harmful cultural belief..." – this is one of the key psychologists in the world – "...that much of our everyday suffering is a damaging encumbrance best swiftly removed. A belief increasingly trapping us within a worldview that regards all suffering as a purely negative force in our lives."

How profound is that? From the guy that literally wrote the book. That last line is just so haunting to me. "A belief increasingly trapping us within a worldview..." – and he gets it, this is a worldview – "...that regards all suffering as a purely negative force in our lives."

But, the truth is it's not. There's actually, as heinous as it is, a lot of good that hardship, if you let it, can do in your life. This last week I finally got around to reading the classic "Man's Search for Meaning" by Viktor Frankl. I think it was written in 1946. I'm a little late to the party. But, oh my gosh. It lived up to all the hype. It was beyond good.

So, just to kind of summarize it for you, Frankl, the writer, was a Jewish neurologist and psychologist in Vienna who, at the outset of World War II was taken by the SS to

Auschwitz. His wife and his family were immediately put to death in the gas chambers. And then he spent years – the rest of the war – in literally Hell on earth. First at Auschwitz and then in death camps all through Northern Europe. After the war, he was one of the few to survive the holocaust. He – brilliant mind – pioneered a brand new form of therapy that he called logotherapy. It was "logo" from this Greek idea of "meaning." Meaning-therapy.

It was based on what he discovered at Auschwitz. What he discovered was that the men that made it through – the women, for the most part, were all put to death immediately. And then men who were left in the death camps, the men who made it through, he said were not the ones that were tall or strong or tough or athletic or whatever. It was the men who found meaning in their suffering, who found a purpose to the living Hell. Who had something, a reason to live. So, Frankl, as a psychologist and as a neurologist, he was adamant to the day of his death that the point of life was not to be happy. He said that that's not a human being's – male or female – primal, gut level, instinctive need, desire, angst. That's not the main thing that, as a human being, we crave.

He said the point of life is meaning. That at a primal, gut level, the way we're wired by God or fate or evolution or whatever, the way we're wired is what we need is to live for something greater than our self. Frankl said there are three ways to discover meaning in life. In his own words:

"One: creating a work or doing a deed."

So, your contribution to the world. You write a novel or you start a business or you open a school or lead a church or whatever your thing is.

"Two: experiencing something or encountering someone."

So, relationships. You want to raise your three children or a spouse that you want to live for or whatever. Or, here's number three:

"The attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering."

That was one of three options to find meaning and purpose in life; the attitude that you take, that I take, toward unavoidable suffering. For Frankl, suffering was an opportunity to rise above the situation that we're in – for him it was a death camp – and let it grow and mature our character and, in doing so, take a tragedy and turn it on its head into a triumph. The point of life, he said, if you're in a concentration camp, if you're in a loveless marriage, if you're single at 45 and desperately want to get married, if you have a chronic illness, whatever your thing is, the point of life was the suffer well.

His famous line was that it's not about what we expect from life, it's about what life expects from us. That's his question. You need to stop asking, "What can I get out of life," and ask, "What can life get out of me?"

Now this, of course, is a drastically different take on life in general, and pain and suffering in particular, than what we are used to in Western secular America. Frankl said this:

"To the European, it is a characteristic of the American culture that again and again one is commanded and ordered, really, to be happy. But, happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have reason to be happy. Once the reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically. As we see, a human being is not one in pursuit of happiness, but rather..." – listen to this – "...in search of a reason to become happy."

Last, but not least, through actualizing the potential meaning inherent and dormant in any situation; good, bad, "my life is perfect, I could merch it," or a death camp in Auschwitz and everything in between. In other words, if we aim at happiness, well, then you'll fall short every time. But, if you aim at a life of meaning, the odds are happiness – at least in time – will come along the way.

Now, Frankl was not a follower of Jesus. As far as I can tell, he was kind of a Jew of agnostic, ambiguous faith. But, his teaching – in particular on hardship – was very much in line with that of Jesus and the writers of the Old and the New Testaments. Over and over again, the writers of the Bible make the point that pain and suffering have the potential to catalyze growth and maturity in our character. There's a running metaphor all through

the library that is Scripture about how pain and suffering are like a refiner's fire. We read that here in Job right there in Job 23:10.

"He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold."

That's kind of the idea of the refiner's fire. But, let me show you a few more examples.

Psalms 66:10: "For you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance."

Isaiah 48:10: "See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction."

Jeremiah 9:7: "Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says:

"See, I will refine and test them, for what else can I do because of the sin of my people?"

Zachariah 13:9: "This third I will put into the fire; I will..." – what? – "...refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.'"

The words of Jesus in Mark 9:49: "Everyone will be salted with fire."

And then, finally, I love what Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:3: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah! In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you," – so, it's coming – "who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice," – you celebrate, you throw a party, you imbibe joy – "though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith..." – and here it comes – "of greater worth than..." – what? – "...gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus the Messiah is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

How good is that? Over and over again the writers of the Bible make the point that suffering can do to your character what fire can do to gold. It can change you, grow you, mature you, get the dross out of your life, the unnecessary gunk that isn't right, isn't pure, isn't up to caliber, out of you. Test you, show you what's really inside, make you take a long, hard look and, in the end, help you to emerge more beautiful and pure and valuable than ever before.

To drill down on that, here's five things that pain and suffering can do in your life if you open up your life to it and to Jesus in it. First off, it can deepen your love for God. C.S. Lewis had that great line: "Pain is God's megaphone to a deaf world."

And, while I think that God is rarely responsible for the pain in our life, I do think that often pain, in whatever way, shape or form it comes, is a wake up call that is used, at least, by God to get our attention. Pain shows us when our loves are out of order. Here's what I mean by that: you know, the Buddha was right that suffering is the byproduct of desire. That's kind of common sense. We're sad if you're single and you're 40 and you're aching for a spouse, you're sad because you desire marriage. If you're sick, you are sad because you desire health. If you're poor, you're sad because you desire wealth. If you hate your job, you're sad because you desire your dream job or whatever.

Suffering is the byproduct of desire. But, I think that the Buddha, with all due respect, was incredible wrong to say, "Therefore, cut desire out of your life." That's one way out of it, and I think it is, by far, not the best way out of it. There's a fourth century theologian by the name of Augustine that I have a mixed, kind of love/hate relationship with. A ton of his stuff I really take issue with. But, he was great on this issue. He said that the problem – and this is especially acute in a time of hardship – isn't that we desire, it's that we desire of the wrong things. Or the right things, but out of order.

So, for Augustine, the problem isn't that we love our family or our spouse or our job or money or our home or apartment or whatever too much. It's that we love God too little. And, if you make anything other than God ultimate, like the top priority in your life, your source of the meaning of life, the purpose of life, my joy. Anything other than God, doesn't matter if it's heinous evil or if it's a great thing. Church, leadership, marriage, family. Anything other than God, if you make it ultimate, you will always live in fear, because anything other than God can be taken away from you at any moment. Life can be taken away from you. One diagnosis. When breath becomes air.

Liberty can be taken away from you. Happiness, in a phone call, can be taken away from you. So, if you make anything other than Jesus ultimate, then you live in a constant state of anxiety. "Am I going to lose it? Am I going to lose it? Am I going to lose it? Is it not going to work out? Am I going to lose my job? Am I going to get this job? How long am I going to be single? Is this going to happen? Is this going to happen?"

You live in this state of anxiety. Or if, God forbid, you actually face that hardship, you go through it, you live with this profound sense of sadness. "I can't believe that happened. I can't believe this happened. I can't believe the other happened. I'm ruined. It's the end of the world."

But, on the other side, if you make God ultimate, well, Jesus can never be taken away from you. Life can. Liberty can. But, Jesus can't. And so you're set free from anxiety and, on the flip side, sadness. So, Augustine said, "Listen, the key is not to eliminate desire, contra Buddha, the key is to reorder your loves. To make God ultimate, first and foremost."

In the language of Jesus, to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Or, in another place, to seek first the kingdom and His righteousness. And the reality is that suffering is a great opportunity to do that. You take a long, hard look at your loves because, when everything in your life is stripped away and you're left with little or nothing and you don't have your desire, you don't have what you want and, because of that, you're stressed or you're sad or whatever, there's an incredible opportunity there to go to God and to express all of that desire and all of that ache. To be human is to desire. Don't eliminate it, redirect it to point all of that in the direction of God Himself. To run deeper into the heart of God; to seek God and to find God.

So, suffering can be an amazing chance to deepen your love for God. Secondly, if you're taking notes, to deepen your character. Did you notice all of that testing language? Did you notice that? Who is the testing for? God or us? I would argue that at least most of the time it's not for God, it's for us. So, when we read about testing in the Bible, don't think a test like a college exam and you get a grade and you pass or you fail and you get into college or you don't get into the college or grad school that you want based on your IQ or whatever. No, think of it more like a metallurgist test. That's the imagery. Where you start to heat up the raw material, heat up the silver, heat up the gold, and what comes to the surface, you see what's actually inside.

I think that testing, more than anything, is for you, for me, to see what's actually inside. It's kind of like when you squeeze a sponge. It might look great on the outside, but if it's actually got a bunch of gunk in it, when you squeeze, it it all comes out. This is what life is like. We can look really good on the outside. You dress up, you have your make-up on, you're cool, you've got your new tattoo. That's great. But, the reality is, when we face hardship, in particular if it's acute, it takes all of our emotional energy just to get through the day. So, we have nothing left to fake it and who we are is laid bare before God, before people around us, our community, our family, our friends, our roommate, before our own heart and mind, and we are forced, whether we want to or not, to take a long, hard look at our character.

Which, in turn, creates an amazing opportunity if we want and if we let it to do the deep work necessary in that moment to grow and mature in that area or areas of our character. Not to mention that hardship itself, with or without your help, does something to steel our character. Steel like "s-t-e-e-l." Like the metal. Like, not steal your character like to take it away. You know what I'm saying? I mean that in a good way. Got it. You got it. Well, you're smarter than I am.

One: it can deepen your love for God. Two: it can deepen your character. Third: it can deepen your humility.

Pain and suffering creates a depth in who we are. A genuine, authentic, you don't fake it,

kind of grounded reality. Because it shows you that you're not in control and you never were. It's easy to forget that. In the West, in particular, with all the self help stuff – and I don't mean to sound at all old or derogatory. I don't mean it that. But, in particular if you're young, it's easy to think, "Man, I'm the captain of my own destiny. I pulled myself up by my bootstraps. I'm going here. I'm going there."

But, it's an illusion. You get a diagnosis, you get a pink slip, somebody that you love and care about dies, you get a phone call and you realize how fragile a thing life is. It can deepen your humility.

Four: it can deepen your empathy. Hardship humbles us in a good way and it then creates empathy for other people in pain and suffering. We all know this. People that have not been through pain and suffering yet are usually really annoying when you're in it. Right? And like, people mean well, but people are trite. People kind of just want you to like, "Come on, man. Just get over it. What's the big deal?" People drop cliché after cliché. "Hey, everything happens for a reason. Hey, God's in control." And you just want to punch them in their perfect teeth and their Instagram body and their horrible, awesome life. "Just get out of me!"

It's not helpful at all. Sometimes people mean well, they just honestly have no clue. They've never been there. They've never been through it. But, once you go through it, once you go through whatever your Hell is, whatever your hardship is, the cliché, it just doesn't work anymore. You know, even if you've never been through what that person is up against, you know what pain is like. And there's a deep work of empathy, a solidarity that you stand with other people in hardship. I think of that beautiful line in the first chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. He writes about "the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort with which we have received from God."

I keep praying this over a number of people the last few weeks in a time of hardship. Because, this is one of the most meaningful parts of pain and suffering. The knowledge that God can and will use our pain and suffering to help other people. All of a sudden, that's just, oh my gosh. God will, if I let him, if I open up my life, if I'm honest, if I'm courageous, whether it's now or later, God can and will use my pain to help others through a time of pain.

Then, finally, it can deepen your joy. Suffering shows us all that we take for granted. And there's a lot, by the way. And it exposes the depth of our entitlement as things we love are striped away. But, what can happen in suffering, if you let it, is there's this ironic twist – and it's not usually at first. Usually it takes a while – where we start to celebrate the simple pleasures of life. We wake up with a roof over our head, a cup of coffee in the morning, a sunny day. How great was today? It was like the Garden of Eden. A glass of wine at night before bed. A conversation with a good friend. Whatever it is for you. We feel a deep sense of gratitude to God and we wake up to the reality staring us in the face all along, but that we were blind and oblivious to, that all of life, everything good and beautiful and true in our existence is all grace.

In an ironic twist, eventually we often become more joyful than ever before. Go read all of the passages in the New Testament about suffering and you will notice this bizarre thing that, 9 times out of 10, in the same breath, the writer has something to say about suffering and about joy. Did you see that in Peter? Like, in the same breath he writes about celebration and joy and always rejoicing and then he writes about grief, suffering, all kinds of trials, pain. There's a beautiful juxtaposition. It's a time of celebration and a time of lament at the same time.

So, my point here tonight can deepen your love for God, deepen your character, deepen your humility, your empathy and even your joy. My point is that pain and suffering have the potential to catalyze growth and maturity in our life.

This last week was my birthday, which was kind of fun, but I'm past the age where that's a good thing. You know? Or an exiting thing. It's a good thing. It's not as exiting as it used to be.

So, it was my birthday and one of my best friends, Dave and Ashley Lomas, who were here last hour, came up from San Francisco and we went out to dinner Friday night on my birthday with Dave and Ash and with Gerald and Jenny, who you guys know. It was the six of us and we had this fantastic meal at this restaurant I love. It was just so fun. I'm with some of my best friends and we just had a fantastic time. And, you know, at one point, Gerald asked me, "Hey, man. How do you feel about the end of your year?"

And I just said, "Honestly, I am just so glad this year is over."

And I wasn't trying to be Debbie Downer, that was just my honest answer. I am so glad this year is over. The last year – really the last three or four years, but the last year in particular has just been hard for me. Nothing like catastrophic. No Job experience at all. But just, I don't have time to get into it because I'm already over time, but it's just been hard on a whole bunch of levels. Relationship stuff in our community, my wife's health, my own emotional health, some church stuff. I don't have time to get into it. But, it's just been a rough three or four years and the last year in particular.

So, we had this great night. Then, at the end of the night, my wife started this thing. So, we have this tradition in my house since I was a kid and we do it with our missional community where, whenever somebody has a birthday, at the meal or at dinner or whatever, we go around and we do an affirmation circle and we call out something that we love about that person. And I'm an introvert so, usually, I just feel awkward and don't really like it. But, it was this really moving time Friday night as some of my best friends went around the table and just started to call out. People who know the good in my character and who know most of the bad in my character. People just started to say, "Man, I see this in you and I love it. I see this in you."

And that's so powerful and prophetic when it's done right by people that know you and love you. Because, often, people around you see the seeds of your God-given identity and calling, see who God – not necessarily who you are, but who you're starting to become, and they call that out often before you even see it. And then there's this moment of revelation and you're like, "Whoa. That's true of me? Whoa. That's pretty rad. I like that about me. I want to be that. I'm not sure that I am that, but they say I am. I want to live into that."

There's something really powerful and prophetic. So, anyway, we just had this moment and it was really beautiful as some close friends spoke some kind things about my character. And then we wrapped up, went home, it was Sabbath night and my phone was off. It was kind of late and I just sat on my couch before bed and I started to process it. I just was really moved by it. And it hit me that every single thing they said, I can directly link to the last year or two or three of hardship in my life. I can directly say, "Yeah, that was brought about through this and that was brought about through this."

It also hit me that three or four years ago, none of those statements were true of my character. So, none of those things, which were good things, – I won't pass them along, that would be arrogant. And there's lots of bad pieces of my character that you know about. But, none of those good pieces of my character, three or four years ago, none of them were true of me. And three or four years ago, I was doing way better. I was at the height of my career. I was leading a mega church. I was making all this money. I was doing – not all this money. I was a pastor. But, whatever. More money than I'm making now living in a city and just trying to make rent every month.

So, I was at this moment where my life was just doing this and then, right now over the last few years it's doing more of this, you know? It's like, "Whoa!"

I'm kind of at this lull. I'm like, "Gosh. I'm in my mid-30s. I want to take over the world."

And, instead, it's like Jesus is doing something else in my life. And I was just so moved. None of this would have happened if it hadn't been for the last few hard years. And I was just, for me, that kind of reframed everything for me. That makes it all worth it. Because, at the end of the day, what matters more than anything is your character. This world will forget you in 10 seconds. It will forget me in less time than that. The one thing that you will carry with you for all of eternity is your character. It's who you are becoming in your apprenticeship to Jesus.

So, I say that just to encourage you that wherever you're at, if you're in a time of hardship, good can come, and will if you let it, out of this time of your life. And please don't write me off if the hardship you're in isn't catastrophic. You're like, "Well, I know. It's not Job. It's not like Orlando quality. It's just I really don't like my job. Or it's just this or that or the other."

It doesn't matter. You know, Frankl had this great point in his book about how pain and suffering behave like gas in a room. It doesn't matter. If you release a quantity of gas into

a room, it doesn't matter if the room is the size of a cardboard box or the size of a warehouse. That gas will fill the entire space evenly and equally. In the same way, it doesn't matter if your hardship is major or minor, it will fill your life, your heart and your mind in particular to capacity.

So, some of you are at a really hard spot. Some of you it's not that bad. But, it has had an affect. This is where people really sell themselves short when they say something like, "Oh, yeah. I'm in a hard time. But, you know, it's nothing compared to my friend Joe who has cancer. It's nothing compared to people in Orlando this morning. It's nothing compared to Job. It's nothing."

And that's true. That's true. A lot of people have it way worse than you. That doesn't mean that what you're up against is easy. It doesn't mean that you should just write it off and say, "Well, it's kind of a minor thing and it's stupid and whatever."

No. For you it's a thing and you need to face it and meet God in that place of pain. So, I just want to say, wherever you're at tonight, a ton of you, "I swear my life is perfect, I could merch it." That's great. By the way, if you don't know that record, you all need to listen. Okay? I'm so white. I'm like extra white and I love that thing.

But, a lot of you are at a place of hardship. Major or minor, it doesn't matter. And I just want to say to you, the line that I keep thinking of all week long – I was not going to put this in my teaching, but last minute I felt compelled. It's this line from James:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

One translation of that Greek into English has it this way: "Don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature."

So, I just want to end on that note. Let it do its work. Let this season that you're in, – hard, easy, major, minor – let it do its work. Let Jesus do His work. Even if this was not remotely brought about by Jesus, He's still there with you in it. And never give up hope. Frankl made that point so clear in his book that the second people gave up hope – he would tell this story about how people would always save one last cigarette in the death camp. And whenever he saw somebody take out that last cigarette and smoke it, they never lived more than two days. He said that was the beginning of the end.

For him, that was a symbol of despair. Never, ever, ever give up hope. And our hope is the fact that Jesus is back from the dead and the Kingdom of God is here and is coming. And, because of that, the bad things in your life can and, if you let Jesus do His thing, will be turned into good in some way, shape or form. The good things in your life, salvation, the reality of the Holy Spirit in you, those things can't be taken away. And the best things of life, the resurrection of the dead, the healing and renewal of the cosmos that's coming for you, the best things in life are yet to come. Never forget that.

Let's stand and pray.