

The State of the Church Part 4

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This morning we are going to continue our series of messages on the title, "The State of the Church." That's been the title for the last three Sundays and today that's the title as well. This should be our last message in this series, the state of the church, and so we're going to begin reading, we'll be in a number of passages this morning, but we're going to begin reading from James 1. You can turn back there to James 1. Actually, I tell you what, let's do something, let's start in Colossians 1. I said we were going to be moving around. I want to start in Colossians 1. Hold your place in James 1 because we're going to read Colossians 1 and then go to James 1 as our Scripture reading to start before we pray this morning. And before we read from Colossians and James, I want to just help tie things together if you haven't been with us in previous weeks that we at Providence for the last five or six months have been spending some energy and time praying and discussing where we are as a church. It's been a time of self-reflection, self-examination particularly for the elders and deacons as well the staff, and I would say especially for me and Patti and our lives and hearts just really asking the question how are we doing as a church? How healthy is our ministry? You know, what our strengths, what our weaknesses, what would the Lord have us do in coming years to be more effective for him. You know, in light of the changing landscape we see in our culture but really trying to examine against the pattern laid down in Scripture, how are we doing? And so we've done a number of things to help us with that. We have had someone helping us from a consultation standpoint, Ray Gentry, a man with a lot of experience in church administration has been consulting with us and we've had some had conversations. We did a survey of the congregation last spring to ask you how you thought we were doing in many areas, what were weaknesses, strengths, that kind of thing, still evaluating that and working on some of those things that's been behind a lot of what has already happened, but we're also thinking of how to learn from what the Lord wants us to learn there.

And I, in the state of the church after my sabbatical this summer, spent some time really praying and reflecting on the church. I really came to some clarity on some things that I felt like we need to do personally and as a body. And I said in the first message on the state of the church three Sundays ago, I said I feel like the state of the church is that we're a very healthy church in many ways, healthy but stuck was the phrase that I used. Healthy but stuck. Many exceptional strengths, you know, many things about our church, the clarity of the gospel, the priority of the word, the love of the saints for one another, earnest desire to glorify God, to be God-centered, you know, to have a high view of

Scripture. There are so many things that we can say that are wonderful about this congregation and all of us and what a joy and privilege it is to serve here, and I said I would rather be here than anywhere else that I know of. And so healthy church but stuck that in many ways we realize that there's some patterns that have developed where we need to sort of break through some things to be where God wants us to be.

So how do we get unstuck was kind of the question driving this series, and I shared that I felt like we need some ministry mind shifts. That was a phrase I borrowed from Colin Marshall and Tony Payne in their book "The Trellis and the Vine," ministry mind shifts. And so I've tried to think about our church and what are the ministry mind shifts, that is, what are patterns of thinking and habit, even values that we have as a church body that we need to change to be more in line with Scripture. Every church has a culture, what cultural changes do we need to make in our church?

And so I began unpacking those. We covered four to the present and I want to look at our fifth today. Just to remind you, first thing we talked about was that we want to move from being gap driven, gap driven to gift driven in ministry, not just looking at gaps and trying to fill gaps but trying to find, look at the gifts that we have and see where can we use the gifts that we have, spiritual gifts of the body. And I said we need to move from being risk averse to being bold in faith. Not focusing so much on what can go wrong but focusing on what God is calling us to do. Thirdly, I mentioned two weeks ago, those first two were in that first message, two weeks ago we looked at we need to move from a mind shift, from a mindset of enlisting workers. It's related to that gap driven, gift driven. It's a little different angle on it. We need to move from a mindset of enlisting workers to equipping ministers, that everyone is a minister here and everyone should see their role as a minister and the role of the leadership is to equip the saints for the work of ministry. And then last time we went to Colossians 1 and we talked about we need to move, another ministry mind shift is to move from focusing almost exclusively on instructing the corporate body to also giving equal time to developing each individual. We need to focus on developing the individuals as well as developing the corporate body.

And we took this from Colossians 1. I want to start there again, verses 28 and 29. Remember we talked about how the corporate body as we grow, we grow up into and from Ephesians 4:11 to 16, the wonderful picture that God paints there of how the church as we come together and we worship together and we fellowship together where we encourage one another in the things of God, we speak the truth in love, we all grow up corporately into the likeness of Christ, that somehow the church body develops more and more of the character corporately of Christ. An amazing thing. We want to keep that before us. We're not trying to minimize that at all, but we're trying to give equal time to another aspect that we find in Colossians 1:28 and 29, that it's not just about the corporate development, it's also about each individual being developed, and this is what we focused on last Sunday. Colossians 1:28-29 says, "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." Paul says, "I also have a mindset as an apostle, as I build the church, I have a mindset to look at each individual," three times, "every man, every single

individual person and see that they are going closer and moving further toward Christ-likeness." And so these are the problem of the one and the many. They're equally valid. We're to think about the church corporately and how are we doing and we're to think about each Christian individually. So how the Lord then perfects each individual and that we don't ever become perfect in the way we use the word. The biblical use of the word "perfect," often translated "perfect," is actually the word which means "complete; fully developed; mature; having basically all the working faculties that someone should have." A mature man is someone who has got the mindset of a man. He thinks like a man. He knows how to do the things that a man needs to do.

And so maturity is that way, but we're to think of that. So Paul says this is a key priority. Now I want you to turn to James 1:2-4, a familiar passage, and I feel like this is really important because this is such a difficult concept to get that I think it warrants being one of the five things I think we need to do as far as ministry mind shifts. And I'm going to say the fifth ministry mind shift we're going to see in James 1 is we need to move from resisting, we need to move from resisting God's plan to embracing God's provision. Resisting God's plan, how do we resist God's plan? I'm not resisting God's plan. Who are you talking about? Who's resisting God's plan? I think we all do because God's plan we're going to see in the Scriptures is that you and I have to suffer to be more like Jesus. We need adversity. We need problems. We need pain. We need suffering. We need conflicts if we are to grow, to be more like Christ. This is a feel-good message, isn't it? It's reality.

And so what happens is we all because, listen, we're in a fallen world. It wouldn't have been this way if sin had not entered the world. We wouldn't have had to experience suffering to the level that we do. There would still have been hard work if Adam and Eve had never sinned. They still would have worked hard, but it wouldn't have been the toil and agony that it became. Death and decay would not have entered the world. And now in a fallen world, the Lord subjected the world to futility so that we would look up and that's really the function of suffering, in a word, is it makes you stop and look up to God. And because sin, even in the believer, remaining sin in the person who has a changed heart, remaining sin continually drags our focus down on the horizontal and one of God's great purposes in suffering is to make us look up to him. And we tend to resist his plan, his plan to make you and me more like Jesus. If we want to just nail this down, the plan that he has for me, the plan that he has for you, is that we suffer enough to become more like Christ every day, and at particular times, in greater and lesser measure. Sometimes in very great measure we have to suffer. That's his plan.

Now we don't consciously resist it fully in the sense of I don't want to be more like Jesus. If you're born again, you want to be more like Christ, at times more than others but basically you don't resist that in concept, but you don't want to hurt, nobody wants to hurt. I mean, we do have, you know, we're supposed to, God wires our bodies to feel pain so that you move away from pain. You know, if you put your hand on the stove and it's on. You know, sometimes you back up against the stove or something and it's on and you didn't know it and, well, if it's on some nerve ending tells you, doesn't it? "Ow!" And it's get away. I mean, your hand instinctively goes back from pain. And that's a good thing. I

mean, if you don't have that you do great damage to the tissues in your hand or whatever part of your body encounters that hurtful influence.

And so there's a sense in which pain, resisting pain is good and I'm not saying we're supposed to go and just be pain-loving people. "Bring it on, Lord." Every day just bring it on. I want more suffering." No, I'm not saying that. That's not right. It's good to alleviate pain. It's good to ease pain. Part of how we love one another is help each other through painful times and softening the impact of suffering on others by mourning with them and loving them. And you don't just always come in to another believer and say, "Well, hey, God's really making you like Christ. I can see you're in agony. This must be great what's happening, right brother?" No, that's not how we're supposed to mourn with those who mourn. It's a complex reality but we have to understand in a fundamental way, we have to remove from resisting God's plan to embracing God's provision. Suffering is his provision and in the midst of suffering, he even wants to provide more for us.

So that's the theme of the message, to move from resisting God's plan to embracing God's provision. James 1:2, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." The reason I read Colossians 1 first was Paul said he wants to, he labors to present every man, what? Perfect, complete in Christ. He's laboring at that. That is the goal. The goal that every one of us should have for ourselves and for every other believer that we have opportunity to influence is we all want to be more like Jesus. We all are aspiring to that. That's the goal. What does James say about how that goal is met? "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." You have to have trials. You have to have suffering to be made perfect so God has to bring suffering into our lives and we want to learn to cooperate with him, to be able to alleviate the pain that we can, but to embrace the process, to embrace God's will for us.

Let's go the Lord in prayer and ask his blessing as we consider these things.

Father, we come to You today mindful of our need of grace. In every way, Lord, we need grace. In sin, Lord, the mind is darkened. Your word tells us that the natural man does not receive the things of God for they're spiritually discerned. The will is alienated. The mind set on the flesh does not submit itself to the law of God, nor indeed can it. And the affections are estranged. We love those things that we ought not love. Sin does that in us and even in believers this remaining sin we must battle every day. Lord, today we ask for Your special blessing upon Your word by the power of Your Spirit that You would grant us more clarity. Thank You for giving us the mind of Christ now for a new heart that comes through regeneration, being born again by the power of Christ with the blessing of repentance and faith. Thank You, Lord, for these things and now help us to walk in truth. We pray that we would know the truth and we would continue in the word and we would know the truth and the truth would set us free. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So we need to move from resisting God's plan to embracing God's provision. So in this world the Lord has ordained that anything really of value has to come through great effort and usually through some measure of suffering. It is through suffering that character is forged. It is through suffering that man, even unbelievers, rise to the occasion. I've often thought about this in my reading. I love history and particularly military history, and so I've enjoyed reading about lots of different people through history. One of the things that struck me one day when I don't remember how, I must have been reading in the Scriptures was reading some passage like this and I was thinking about some people I've read. Two of my heroes, I would say in secular or whether they're believers or not, I'm not trying to speculate on, but would be George Washington and Winston Churchill, that inarguably anyone who looks with any objectivity would say these were two great men, as it goes with how men impact their world.

Washington. Churchill. How do we know their greatness? Well, we know their greatness because we have people that wrote about it and we can read it, but how could we have known of their greatness if they had not been through the affliction they went through? We would never have known what a great man George Washington was if he had not lived through the American Revolution and risen to lead, if he had not experienced what Thomas Paine wrote in "Common Sense." That was a pamphlet that Thomas Paine wrote as the revolution was beginning that first year. George Washington had it read to his soldiers before they set out, a day before they set out to the Battle of Trenton. If you know some, I really wish everyone knew about these things. You really should. You know, anyway, I'm just going to stop there. I'm sorry. But he had them read, he had all the soldiers that listened to what Tom Paine had written, this pamphlet called "Common Sense." The war was not going well at all. It looked like almost a lost cause and these words that began that pamphlet, "These are the times that try men's souls." It's no time for the sunshine patriot. These are the times that require men to dig deep down and find something in their souls. And anyway, that's all I'm going to read from that but I want you to see, we would never have known the character of George Washington had he not been in the furnace of affliction that he was in. He would have just been another man who lived and died and you and I would not know about him.

Same with Winston Churchill. How would we know who Churchill was if it wasn't for Adolf Hitler? He was the man who stood up to Adolf Hitler. Hitler was ready, I mean, England was ready to surrender. All of the momentum that had been gained by Germany in rushing across France and wiping out the French army and the British expeditionary force, though they were able to siphon off 180,000 or so of the soldiers at Dunkirk, which itself was a miracle, but even after that, the British people were ready to throw in the towel, especially all of the British leadership. The French were convinced the British had no hope of holding out. Churchill was the only person in power who believed that they could do it, and he imposed his will on the people. He motivated the people. He saved England and likely saved Europe for generations because if you didn't have England, it would be hard for America to ever think about going over and liberating France, Holland, Belgium, etc.

Well, we would never have known about these people if they didn't have to go through what they went through. And in fact, the character itself made them greater. The character test. Now that's just speaking humanly but the principle applies and we see it in James 1, that trials produce endurance, endurance produces perfection, growth. This is again not perfection in sense of absence of flaw, but maturity.

Turn with me to Romans 5, same path, the same idea is taught by Paul in Romans 5:3 to 5. He uses a very strong word here, verb. "And not only this," Romans 5:3, "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations." This is, "we boast, we glory in our tribulations," Paul says. Wait a minute, Paul, have you lost your mind? I mean, who wants to glory in our suffering? But Paul says we glory in our tribulations knowing what? Why would we glory in suffering? Isn't that insane just only on its face? It would be if it weren't for what Paul says next, "knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint." You see, it's the affliction, it is the tribulation that brings about something that cannot happen otherwise. So Paul says because of this, because we want hope, we want more hope, we want more Godly character, we want tribulation then because it brings about these things. This is the way God has made things.

So what I wanted you to think about, we have two points this morning as we continue to unpack this. How do we move from resisting God's plan to embracing God's provision. First point, we need to change how we see suffering. We need to change how we see suffering, adversity, problems, conflicts. How do we normally see those things? I mean, there always should be a little bit of an "oh no" element. Oh no. Really? You know, whether it's something around the house. You know, one of the joys of being a homeowner, you don't know about this until you own a home, right? You know, for almost 40 years, I was in relative bliss. Even when you rent you still start to figure these things out, but you don't know it the way you do until you own it because somebody else has to pay for it while you're renting. But something happens and it's, "Oh no." And there's a measure in which "oh no" is okay, and there's a measure at which ending suffering and relieving suffering is okay. Listen, it's good to want to soften suffering. The problem is it is an inordinate desire in us most of the time.

What is an inordinate desire? An inordinate desire is when you want something good but you want it more than you ought to. You want it so much that it crowds out something more important. But we should want more than we want to alleviate suffering is we should want to maximize the benefit of suffering for the glory of God. You see, we can want, it's appropriate to want to ease suffering but it must be secondary to a heart that really wants to embrace God's provision. This is God giving me something. This is an expression of his love for me. In fact, I try to remember to do, that's actually a good thing to think about. You know, when something happens, the Bible says everything that happens happens according to the decree of God. Lamentations 3:37 and 38, "Who can speak and it come to pass unless the Lord has commanded it?" That's talking about human will. Nobody can do something unless God has commanded it. God's taking full responsibility for everything. Next verse, Lamentations 3:38, "Is it not from the mouth of

the Lord that both good and evil go forth?" The Bible is saying clearly God is sovereign over good and evil.

Now he's not the author of evil. You've got to let the rest of Scripture help us understand exactly what that means. God hates evil. He's not tempted to evil. James is going to tell us this later in this chapter. He tempts no man to evil. He doesn't want anybody to do evil in his heart. No, he doesn't. But you see, he allows people to do what they will, and he's so infinitely wise and sovereign that he knows what will happen in every circumstance and if he allows that circumstance to happen, this is what's going to happen, and he only chooses to allow those circumstances to happen which he chooses to want to happen so that he's sovereign over everything. He decrees everything. Everything whatsoever comes to pass. And that's really the most wonderful news in the world, if you really, I know at first glance, it's troubling, but you stay there and really think through what the alternative is if God's not in control of everything we are completely at the whim of Satan, sinners, hateful people. Well, that's kind of frightening. You ought to be anxious. It makes sense to be fearful. You and I ought to be depressed if that's the case. But the good news is that's not the case. Satan is real, he's like a roaring lion seeking who he may devour, evil people will go from bad to worse God says, and yet he is sovereignly reigning in such a way that whatever comes into your life you can know has come to you from the loving hand of God as a provision to you, as an expression of his love.

I heard someone say that one time talking about it was a group of pastors were meeting and they were talking about somebody, he was talking about some... This was in generalities, appropriately talked about. It's like, "I'm dealing with a situation in my church and this person I'm dealing with is just incredibly difficult." I think it was actually a person on his leadership team like a deacon or something like that. And he was sharing that he had been just really, they're just constantly resisting and giving him a hard time and he was struggling with, you know, some bitterness and anger, sinful anger toward this person and the Lord hit him with this is the truth of Scripture and applying it to that particular circumstance. And this is what he shared with these other ministers, he said, "You know, I came to see that the Lord basically just helped me to see this person that you're talking about that you think is such a burr in your saddle, they are an expression of My love for you." That's really true. The pain they're causing is forging character in your life. The suffering you're experiencing is making you pray more and cling to Christ.

And we need to learn to think that way about suffering. In fact, I think it's a good thing to, you know, this is why the Bible says in everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. In everything give thanks not exactly for everything. You don't thank the Lord directly for the death of a loved one. No. Death is an ugly, evil thing. It's our last enemy to be overcome. But you can thank God in that circumstance because you know that the days of their life were numbered before there was yet one of them, that even this is meant somehow to be a blessing to every single person that this touches who will look to Christ and rest in him, that God can, what Satan meant for evil, God means for good, those words that Joseph said to his brothers. I love the fact that God puts that in the first book of the Bible. The first book of the Bible, Genesis. The outline of the book, I mean from 37 to 50, the last 14 chapters of that book is basically the doctrine

of divine providence. The name of our church, Providence, that's actually the idea of the word providence. God foreordains whatever comes to pass it, that's his sovereignty but you know what providence, what is it? He provides. Do you see that? It's his provision.

Well, so the first book of the Bible he gets this settled right up front. Every major doctrine you can find in Genesis. You can find justification by faith alone. You find certainly everything about sin, everything about man, everything about what it means to be in relationship with God. It's all there in the first book of the Bible. And I love the fact that 14 chapters are on providence. That's because it's the story of Joseph. Joseph, we meet him in chapter 37, one of Jacob's 12 sons. Remember he's he sold into slavery by his brothers who are jealous. Remember, he's the one that is favored by his dad, Jacob, the first son of the wife he really loved, Rachel. Some of you are very familiar with that. Some of you maybe you just read 30 Genesis and maybe y'all need to read 37 to 50 anyway this week, some extra homework if you'd like that for extra credit, read that. But he is favored by his dad. His brothers began being envious of him. He doesn't handle it super well. I think he's kind of dealing with a little bit of pride himself. When you read the text carefully, at least he's pretty foolhardy when he tells that second dream. You know, the first dream I understand. Feel like God was speaking to you. You go and you just can't contain it. But the second one, Joseph, really? I mean, you're reading that and you're like, "This is not going to go well. Don't tell them." But it just comes pouring out of him.

Then his brothers sell him into slavery. He is a slave to Potiphar for a number of years. Basically, 17 when we meet him and when he goes into Egypt he's 30 when God takes him out of the dungeon. He spends some years in Potiphar's basic household as his lead slave. God is with him. And then he spends a number of years as the main helper. Well, he's in prison, he's put in prison, but he's so blessed by God that the jailer uses him as his main administrator of the jail. He still has to be in jail. He can't leave jail. But here he is. God is with him. And the Scripture says in both places, "And the Lord was with him. The Lord was with him." What was interesting is God had told Joseph, "You're going to be ruler over all your people." That was the message of those two dreams. "You're going to be the ruler. They're all going to bow down to you." And that was the content of the dreams.

Well, what did God do immediately after he told him that? He made him a slave and he made him spend time in the dungeon for 13 years until he then elevated him to the second man in command of Egypt. You see, God forges character in the dungeon. So he tells us that right up front too, "This is the way I work. If you sign up with Me, this is what it's going to be." But what a wonderful blessing God gave to that man because the Lord was with him. He got his attention in a way that he could not get outside of that affliction. Joseph had to cling to God. Can you imagine what it was like when his brothers were ready to kill him and then he's sold into slavery and there he is, you know, bound hand and feet probably with some kind of leg iron so he can't run away. His hands are bound and he's walking all the way down from Canaan into Egypt. "What is going to happen in my life? Why is God letting this happen to me?" He had to have a lot of questions, but he clung to God in the midst of it, and he grew in character because of it.

David, another example, interesting example. David is anointed king. He's given a vision, "You're going to be a leader. You're going to do great things for Me." He's anointed. He's probably we don't know exactly how old he was because the text doesn't tell us how old he was when he was anointed. Probably most scholars think between 12 and 15. He was a, you know, a pre-adolescent or early adolescent, just barely a teenager. That's why after he'd been anointed, he goes out to fight against Goliath or he wants to fight against Goliath, and Saul is like, "You're just a boy. How can you do this?"

Well, he does. He has faith and God works through him, but then after that he spends at least we don't know how many years. We know that he's probably between 12 and 15 when he's anointed king and he becomes king at age 30, but at least seven years, most scholars think and it could be maybe more like 10 or 11, he was on his run for his life from Saul. This is how God treats those he loves. It doesn't look like on the front end that's what you would sign up for but if you could talk to David and you could talk to Joseph, they would say, "There's no better place to be than where I was. I'm so grateful to my gracious, merciful King that He led me there," because it's in the place of adversity that you cry out to God and you find him to be everything that he says he is. The song we sang earlier, "The names of God. Jehovah Jireh. The Lord who provides." You don't know him in that way until you need him to provide, you're in a place of absolute, profound, extreme need and you need God's provision, then he shows up and shows you who he is. Jehovah Shammah, the Lord is there. When you feel abandoned and alone, that's when you need to know his presence and there he is. And Joseph found that out. He understood, though he didn't give the Lord that name, he wasn't the one who did in Scripture. He would Amen from heaven when it was given because he when he was in the dungeon even, it said the Lord was with him. And he knew that in a way that someone who had not been in the dungeon could not understand.

So the necessity of suffering is obvious. How do we see suffering? It's necessary. I want you to turn with me to Hebrews 2. The author of Hebrews does an amazing job of showing us the glory of our Savior. The key part of his message is Jesus suffering for us but not just on the cross, a life of suffering. Hebrews 2:10. "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings." Now he's been talking about the cross, so it's definitely the cross was the climax of this, but in reality his whole life was a life of suffering.

Look on down at chapter 2, verse 17. For Jesus to fulfill his ministry to be our Savior, this had to happen, he says in verse 17, "Therefore," Hebrews 2:17, "Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." Jesus suffered and in all the suffering he was tempted. He was tempted to doubt his Father. He experienced what a human being experiences. We're going to see in chapter 4 he was tempted in every way, yet without sin. And because of

his suffering, he's then able to come to the aid and be the Savior of those who are tempted.

In fact, turn over to chapter 4, verse 15, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." Then chapter 5, verses 7 to 10. This is why Jesus is, according to the author of Hebrews, the perfect high priest. He's the one who's able to bring us back to God. He's the one that is able to meet all of our needs. Verse 7, Hebrews 5, "In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety." Look at this next verse, verse 8, "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered." That is an amazing truth. The Son of God, the perfect, sinless, eternal Son of God is united to flesh, that's the incarnation. Jesus is conceived in the womb of Mary. The eternal Son of God leaves the glory of heaven and enters the womb of Mary. He lives as a man. He does not use his deity. He lays aside, he doesn't stop being God, but he lays aside the prerogatives as God. He does not use his power. He lives as true man, experiencing all that true man experiences. And what he had to experience according to this to be our Savior was he had to learn obedience. Now he never disobeyed. Of course not. Unthinkable. If he had, we are all lost. He perfectly obeyed. He was tempted in all ways, yet without sin, but he learned obedience from the things he suffered. What he's saying is, is that Jesus as he went through more and more suffering, he had the opportunity to yield himself continually to the Father in more and more circumstances, more and more complete offering of his life to God in the midst of suffering and therefore he is made a complete, made perfect, a complete Savior able to be the source of eternal salvation to you and me. He had to live a whole life. It wasn't that he could just show up and be crucified as a blameless lamb. No. He had to live a whole life of being tempted so that he could then give you, if you believe in him, a gift, a perfect, complete record of righteousness. That's why it's such a glorious thing, the gospel. He takes all of your sin away. Christ takes it away, having nailed it to the cross, and he gives you all of his righteousness and his righteousness was hard earned. Blood, sweat and tears. He poured out himself every moment of every day, worshiping God as man was intended to worship God, and he then has an absolute perfect record of righteousness. And so when you make that glorious exchange, you believe on Jesus, you know that you can't do anything, you can't add anything to what he's done, his finished work is sufficient, then you receive that complete record of righteousness. That's how God sees you, as if you had lived his perfect life forever. It never changes. But he had to suffer.

Now think about this: if he had to suffer, why would we think we don't have to? In fact, turn over past James, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter 4 talking about how we should see suffering, the first point. "Therefore, since Christ, this is 1 Peter 4:1, "Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God." Peter says, "Listen, if Jesus had to suffer in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same purpose. You've got to suffer in the flesh. I've got to suffer in the flesh." And the good news is, this is the best way to put sin to death.

So if we're struggling with sin and we all are in different ways at different times, part of how God is going to help you overcome it is making you suffer. So if we understand that, then we actually when suffering comes into our life, we can say, "Lord, okay, I don't like this. Of course I didn't want this. I didn't ask for this, Lord, I don't even want it now. And I'm even by faith happening to say thank You for that You're doing something in it. I don't really feel thankful, but I'm obeying You. You said give thanks. I'm trusting You. You're going to do something good." And part of what we can add to that is, "You're going to use this to help me see how fruitless and ugly sin is and you're going to turn my heart from it more and more through this."

Verse 12 of chapter 4, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you," I love this, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." The fire comes on and he's saying, "Look, why are you saying where'd this fire come from? Don't you understand the process," Peter says. "You're in the Refiner's fire. This is what you signed up for when you came to Christ and this is the most blessed thing that can happen to you."

We need to see the necessity of suffering. How do we see suffering? How do we change? How do we embrace God's provision? We have to see, we have to see to change how we see suffering, we have to see it as necessary. Now the second point. How do we respond to suffering? We have to change how we respond to suffering. If we're going to move from resisting God's plan to embracing God's provision, we need to change how we respond to suffering and here there are a number of things I want to share in the moment, but I want to basically give this principle and I want you to turn to Philippians 3 because this is the heart of the response. Look at verse 8 of Philippians 3, "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." He's talking about what I was talking about a minute ago, the perfect righteousness of Jesus that comes to those who believe. "comes from God on the basis of faith," verse 10, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."

How do we respond to suffering? It is an opportunity to draw nearer to Jesus Christ himself. It's not an obstacle to what and it may be an obstacle to what we want but that's good because we want the wrong stuff. But we shouldn't see it as an obstacle. We should see it as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to draw near to Christ, to experience what Paul is talking here when he says, "You know, we all want to know the power of His resurrection but you can't know the power of His resurrection unless you're also willing to know the fellowship of His sufferings." So it's an opportunity to look to Christ and to say, "Lord Jesus, here I'm suffering and maybe this is something that's relatively small, but it's still suffering and it hurts. You went through things like this too." This isn't maybe the big thing, but he had all kinds of little sufferings he went through; every moment of

every day was suffering for Jesus. I mean, living in a sin-sick world as the eternal holy Son of God, it was all pain. I mean, every day was filled with pain. There was also joy, of course. The joy of the Lord was his strength. The joy of God's presence was his content. He was always having pain swallowed up by joy because he was living out the glorious life that he now enables us to live but what I mean is he was continually experiencing suffering and had to continually lean on his Father.

2 Corinthians 12. Turn back over past Ephesians and Galatians to 2 Corinthians 12. Paul has in the first six verses talked about he has a thorn in the flesh. I talked about this a while back. I preached a sermon maybe six months ago on this, but he has a thorn in the flesh, some kind of physical ailment or suffering. People speculate on what exactly was going on. We don't know. He doesn't tell us, but he recognizes and discerns, and we have it in Scripture so therefore it has to be true because every word of God is true, that it was a messenger of Satan. Somehow Satan was attacking him in his body some way. Maybe something of what like Job experienced where Satan attacked him in his body. And Paul has prayed three times for God to remove it and he hasn't removed it.

So here, verse 7, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." Paul says, "I have learned to turn it around. When something bad happens to me, I run to Jesus and I am able to then boast in the weakness." That which happens at first, I'm sure he always had to work through this himself. "Oh no, something bad happens. Wait a minute. It's an opportunity to run to Christ." And he learned to do it so well that he learned to be at that moment was pretty quick, "Oh, something bad is happening. I'm getting persecuted. Somebody is about to beat me. Lord Jesus, I'm drawing near to You." And he learned to boast in his weaknesses. There was a sense in which he said, "Lord, yes, bring on whatever You need to bring on if it means I'm going to have more intimacy with my Savior." How we're to respond to suffering is to run to Christ. This is exactly the moment that we could be nearest to him. We can share in the fellowship of his suffering, and even more is this wonderful if we're suffering for his name. If we're suffering because people are rejecting us because we love Jesus, he is right there ready to embrace us. You may not feel it immediately, but if you just keep trusting and resting in him, you will experience his sustaining power. So the opportunity of suffering is to run to him and to be made more like him, and this is where the character is forged. We run to Jesus and we receive from Jesus joy in the moment. We receive his meekness in gentleness so that we can respond to those who are being harsh against us. I mean, how do you respond in a godly way? You run to Christ. You abide in Jesus, who you are in him, and then he will give you the grace to be like him, to love those who hate you, to bless those who persecute you.

So we need to embrace God's provision. His provision is he's provided the circumstance so that he might draw us to himself. Ted read earlier at the very beginning from Psalm 37. David wrote half of the Psalter, at least half, 75 Psalms bear his name, 150 Psalms. He might have written a few more that didn't get his name put on them somehow. Some people speculate several seem to be just like David and they want to add those in. But we know 75 for sure because that's in the text. It's actually in the Hebrew when it says a Psalm of David. That's in the Hebrew, even though it comes before verse 1 in your Psalms. How did he come to write that many Psalms? And what are the Psalms? They are songs of praise and worship. They are songs of experience. They are songs where they're prayers of pouring out the heart to God. They're prayers that sometimes start in agony and end in ecstasy. You read the Psalms and you see God is teaching us, "This is what I want you to do. I want you to pour out your heart to Me. This is what relationship with Me means. You go through life, you experience pain, you experience perplexity, you experience circumstances, you don't know what to do and you run to Me and I will be everything to you. I will supply all your needs according to My riches in glory, I want to be everything to you. That's how much I love you."

And David lived that out and so we have 75 inspired records of his communion with God that happened and so much of it happened because he spent at least seven or eight years in the wilderness running for his life from Saul. Later he ran for his life from his own son, Absalom had turned against him. He had a Civil War within his own family. This is the way God works. God knows that you and I get so preoccupied with everything that's not important and he knows that we need to suffer.

So if we're going to embrace as Christians God's plan for our lives, it means we're supposed to be committed to the corporate body and we're supposed to become, be equipped for ministry, that we're going to find ourselves in places and circumstances where we're afraid, we're going to find ourselves failing, we're going to find ourselves in trouble, and what we have to do is embrace also the process. Not resist God's plan or his process, but embrace his provision in the process. If we're going to become more like Jesus, this is how it's going to happen and you think about in your own life, the times where you have walked the closest to the Lord, think about the circumstances that led up to that. Think about the things that you have learned, the deepest convictions you have in your heart in life, when did you learn those? So often you'll see it was during times of profound difficulty and trial.

So the Lord wants us to be people who do this. Now this means we should arm ourselves, but, listen, it also means when we minister to one another, we have to also resist some temptation, and now this is a delicate balance. When my brother or sister is suffering, the highest value is not easing their suffering. That's a value. That is a value, right? Easing suffering is always good but it's not the ultimate value. The ultimate value is that they would become like Christ. So when we pray for them, we shouldn't just pray, "Lord, why have you let this other thing happen to them? Please end their suffering." We should say, "Lord, make this suffering profitable for Your purposes, and their good, and ultimately for the glory of Christ." And then we're to be about encouraging each other with that too. We don't lead with that. Like I said earlier, you don't say when someone is writhing

in pain on the floor, "God's going to do some really neat things in your life through this." No, you hurt with them and you suffer with them and you try to alleviate the suffering and you stop the bleeding. You don't sit there and have a dialogue and discussion about theology, but on the other side of it, "I wonder what God is doing in your life through this. How is the Lord going to use this? We know he's good. We can trust him." That's what we're called to do, to help each other to follow Jesus.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we praise and honor You because You are so wise. You know how to do all things well. You know how to shepherd Your sheep. You know how to take us from being dead in our sins, under the domain of darkness, to translate us to the kingdom of Your Son, and then to lead us all the way through this life to glory. Every single person You have Your eye on, every single child of Yours, and You're foreordaining every single thing that's happening in every single moment of their lives. How good You are. How wonderful You are. And You're doing that not just in an impersonal process where You're just making something. No, You are doing that because You want to have the most intimate personal relationship with every one of Your creations. You know us by name. You know the numbers of hair on our head. You know our thoughts before we think them, our words before we speak them. David said You keep our tears in a bottle. Lord, let us long to know more and more of Your love and Your sufficiency so that we will cooperate with You and we will become much more like Jesus much more quickly and bring much more glory to Him. We pray in His name. Amen.