

The SBJT Forum

SBJT: The book of Hebrews addresses a suffering church. What can we learn from Hebrews for us today on facing suffering as Christians?

Barry Joslin: If we are being honest, suffering

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is not something most of us treasure, embrace, or go looking for. Most of us avoid it, and those of us with children often seek to minimize or eliminate it altogether in their lives, and at all costs. We eschew pain due to a common, self-protecting fear, which also leads us to want to avoid persecution, and which, sadly, often requires our silence concerning the hope within us. But this kind of suffering-free life is an illusion. Sooner or later we will have to face it, just as our brothers and sisters in the book of Hebrews faced it, just as scores of believers are facing it now, and just like our

Lord Jesus faced it. It is naïve to think otherwise, so let us prepare ourselves for it; and let us learn from Hebrews on how to face suffering.

The term itself is found frequently in Hebrews, both in noun and verb forms (e.g., 2:9, 10, 18; 5:8; 9:26; 10:32; 11:36; and 13:12). The term conveys the idea of suffering which arises from an outside source, and in Hebrews it is the reality both for Christ and his people. For the believer, the goal is not to avoid suffering, but to suffer well, with his or her eyes fixed on Jesus who endured far more than we can imagine—and did so joyfully. This example of joyful endurance of suffering is also seen in the lives of believers such as Abraham, Moses, and in the original readers of Hebrews, but most of all, we see it in the suffering of Christ. What, then, does Hebrews teach us about suffering?

First, Hebrews teaches us that believers suffer. Repeatedly, we see the pattern of faithful suffering displayed in the life of Abraham (11:8-16) and Moses (11:24-27). Moses specifically is singled out as forsaking a lifetime of sinful pleasures in Egypt in order to have something better. As the son of

Pharaoh's daughter, all of Egypt's delicacies and sinful delights were his for a lifetime. Yet he chose to forsake the temporary delights of Egypt's treasures in order to gain the eternal reward, "seeing him who is unseen" (11:27), and endured significant sufferings as the deliverer of Israel.

As the pastor who wrote Hebrews wrote to his first-century people, he knew they were badly in need of perseverance. They had grown spiritually weak and dull (5:11-14), and some were tempted to return to Judaism. Pastorally speaking, their endurance through suffering is the purpose for the five warning passages, and is stated explicitly in 10:36. In former days, they had been much stronger in their faith. Hebrews 10:32-36 makes this plain. Some had been jailed for Christ, and had their possessions confiscated. They had endured significant suffering for Christ, were publically made a spectacle, yet they did not shrink back from Christ or one another.

What was their reaction? We would be tempted to think that they would react with fear, but verse 34 says that they accepted *joyfully* the seizure of their property. Why? Because despite the loss of their possessions, they knew that they had a better possession and one that endures and remains; it is both better and lasting (10:34). They disregarded one set of (temporary) possessions in favor of the (eternal) possession that cannot be seized. This is their "great reward" (10:35) and is for all who endure to the end (4:1, 11; 10:36-39). In other words, when our hope is on what is eternal, then the temporary and unavoidable trials of this life fade in relevance and significance. For the writer of Hebrews, there is no other way to endure suffering other than to see it in the light of eternity's reality, which is to have enduring, patient faith that is forward-looking, past the suffering of this age.

In contrast, such faith was not found in the wilderness generation when they suffered. Instead, they saw their circumstances without eyes of faith, consistently rebelled and received God's eternal judgment instead of his eternal joy (3:7-4:11). This is not so for those who are of saving faith, which

is the proof and evidence of that which is unseen (11:1-2, 39-40), and that which looks to the promised reward (12:22-24).

Second, Hebrews reminds us that despite our suffering now what awaits us is our promised reward. What is this promised, great reward and eternal goal? What can sustain the child of God when faced with incredible suffering? It is the promise and assurance of his eternal possession and destination—the long-awaited city to come where Jesus is seen, glorified, and eternally enjoyed (13:14; 11:10, 14-16). Such is the treasure of every believer, from the faithful saints of Hebrews 11 to the faithful followers of Jesus today. Hebrews 12:22-24 teaches that the reward for their suffering and endurance is no less than the joy-saturated presence of Jesus and all the saints. The author writes,

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

In a sermon on this text, John Piper opines that what fuels such endurance is a "deep satisfaction in that future glorious hope; it is a heart that joyfully treasures the promised reward" ("Embracing Suffering;" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyuIqf9cIIQ>). It is a forward-looking faith towards something infinitely better than the temporary losses incurred as a follower of Jesus in this life. This is, by definition, saving faith! It is the faith of Abraham, who looked for the city to come; of Moses, who chose the reward of Christ over the passing pleasures of sin despite great personal cost (11:23-27), "seeing Him who is unseen."

And yet, despite how positive are the examples in Hebrews of first-century believers who suffered well, they are not the primary example presented

in Hebrews. For Hebrews, it is Jesus Christ who best teaches us how to suffer, and not merely to endure it, but to embrace it.

Third, Hebrews presents Jesus as the best example of how to face suffering, embrace it, and endure it joyfully. Jesus suffered exquisite sufferings. Hebrews 2 focuses on Christ's suffering unto death (2:9-18). This perfected him (2:10; cf. 5:8-9), the idea being that in order to be salvation's "pioneer," he had to endure suffering and temptation blamelessly (something he had not done prior to the incarnation), without which his sacrifice could not atone for our sins. He had to be made like us in order to suffer death in our place as the once-and-for-all sacrifice. He has borne the full weight of temptation (2:18) so that he might be the wrath-bearing sacrifice (propitiation) for sin (v 17). In addition to this, Hebrews 9:26 and 13:12 focus on the suffering of Christ at the hands of others, *in order that* his people would be set apart and made holy as a result of his shed blood (note the purpose). In short, Jesus suffered temptation and death so that he might glorify God in the salvation of sinners.

Therefore, since he suffered, we also should expect a measure of suffering in this life since this was the pattern that Jesus himself established. He endured both the exquisite sufferings of incalculable temptation (2:17-18; 4:15) as well as death at the hands of men, even scorning the shame of the cross (Heb 12:2). But how did Jesus do this? How are we

to do this? He endured by looking past the sufferings to the joy and glory that awaited him *after* he faithfully endured. That, in short, is the key to suffering for the believer, seen so clearly in the life of our Savior. *This is crucial for understanding suffering in Hebrews!* Jesus knew that there was something far greater than the horror and suffering of his own execution. He saw past the suffering to the joy of Mt. Zion, the New Jerusalem, and

to the eternal joy and worship of his people! And as our Great Shepherd, he is leading us to our abiding destination (13:20).

How can suffering be endured and embraced? What produces courage and the ability to suffer well, whether part of the original audience of Hebrews, or a 21st century Sudanese believer, or a jailed pastor in Iran, or even a western believer in a free society? Though Hebrews focuses on the kind of harsh suffering that is a result of believing in Jesus, there are implications for other difficult situations as well. For example, what sustains you when you and I suffer because of our sin? What sustains you in the dark hours when cancer marches through the body of a loved one, or when you receive the agonizing phone call at 3 a.m. from the state police saying that your child was killed by a truck driver who fell asleep at the wheel?

Regardless of the cause, kind, or depth of suffering, Hebrews is clear when it comes to the answer for how one endures such trials and suffering: *a forward-looking, faith-filled joy in what is to come.* A heart that joyfully treasures the promised reward sustains his faithful ones throughout such periods. For the writer of Hebrews, such a joyful, forward-looking faith is seen in the examples of Abraham, Moses, the first-century believers, and most prominently, in Jesus himself.

SBJT: On the mission field, how do we balance meeting the needs of suffering people and making sure we are meeting their real need in terms of their relationship with God?

David Sills: The discussion over meeting "felt needs" or "real needs" is one worth having, but very difficult to have in the absence of one or the other. When ministering in the midst of the immense pain of war's destruction, grinding poverty, or starving people during a wasting famine or drought, sermons prepared in comparative security and comfort often seem inadequate. The only true balance is to do exactly what Jesus would do in every situation. Finding that balance begins with recognizing that there is not a single approach

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that will always be the unique solution strategy to every situation. Jesus fed the multitudes, healed the sick, taught disciples, and preached truth, and in every case he ministered to people with precise balance. Since Jesus should be our model in all things, we should strive to do the same.

Our effort to respond to the world's hurts and lostness with a balanced approach requires that we be proactive and not merely reactive. A proactive strategy understands that philosophy drives methodology; what we believe informs what we seek to do. Reactive approaches merely respond to the needs around us which then must constantly adapt to the crises of each day. The proper balance begins with understanding the mission of the church, the vision and aim of the specific mission agency, or the gifts and calling of the believer. Just as great peace comes from knowing what God would have you do, concomitantly, a peace comes by knowing all that is not your task so that you are not constantly distracted.

Bob Pierce, founder of Samaritan's Purse and World Vision, used to pray, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." He had seen the plight of the post-war Korean orphans and yearned to alleviate the needs of the hurting. Many Christians' hearts beat with the same passion, and mercy ministry seems to be their most appropriate action. As the pendulum of missions efforts has swung back and forth through the years between the opposite extremes of mercy ministries and Gospel proclamation, missiologists and theologians have sought to find the balance.

John R. W. Stott sought to find the balance in the mid-1970s in *Christian Mission in the Modern World*. This book began as the Chavasse Lectures in World Mission at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford in 1975. Stott sought to define and defend a balanced position on the topics of mission, evangelism, dialogue, salvation, and conversion. Although not as decidedly as many would prefer, Stott leaned away from the ecumenical efforts trending toward mercy ministries and sought to restore a biblical balance.

In 2005, David Hesselgrave dealt with the balance along with nine other issues in *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* in which he presents both sides of perennial issues facing missionaries, assisting readers to develop informed opinions. In his chapter on "Holism and Prioritism," Hesselgrave presents four positions on the continuum rather than a binary view of social ministry versus Gospel proclamation regarding ministry among the poor. He presents a "radical" view growing out of Liberation Theology, which seeks to promote justice and shalom on earth. Moving to the right, he presents two views growing out of what he calls holism theology. The first of these two is "revisionist" that seeks to minister to individuals without distinguishing between physical or spiritual needs. The next is a "restrained" approach that seeks to minister to physical needs while giving a certain priority to evangelism. The fourth position is the "traditional" approach that grows out of a prioritism theology, which is to make disciples of all nations; other ministries are good but secondary.

Most recently Greg Gilbert and Kevin DeYoung have addressed the question in a more exegetical approach with their 2011 book, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* Their book goes back to Scripture to find the church's mission rather than allowing the contemporary issues of this generation to define and direct missions. While sensitive to needs unique in our time, and while affirming many of the ways that Christians seek to be salt and light in the world are good things to do, they argue that these efforts are often not actually the mission of the church.

Finding the balance between ministering to felt needs versus true needs for the Gospel will always be a tension. Considering that a soul will live or die for eternity while a physical body is but a vapor, we may lean toward exclusive Gospel proclamation. Yet, a Haitian proverb teaches that a hungry stomach has no ears. Paul asks in Romans 10:14, "How are they to hear without someone preaching?" The Gospel is the power unto salvation, without it no one can be saved, and there are untold millions

still untold. Yet, how can they hear when their desperate need at the moment is to stay alive, or save their child, or escape physical attacks? When they know that the preacher could give them food, but he will only preach to them, they discredit the credibility and integrity of his ministry.

The balance we need to achieve can be seen dramatically in extreme situations: an Asian tsunami, a Haitian earthquake, or a typhoon in the Philippines. It is harder to see in the daily drain that comes from responding to poverty tapping on your car window at every stoplight, beggars tapping on your door at meal times, or upon hearing noises at night, peering through your curtains to see a mother with her baby tied on her back going through your garbage bags on the street to find any edible scraps for her family. 26,000 children die daily from starvation and hunger-related diseases. 6,000 people die daily from lack of clean drinking water.

During a famine in Sudan, photographer Kevin Carter snapped a photograph of an emaciated starving child in Africa with a vulture standing a couple of feet behind him, watching and waiting. The photo won him the 1994 Pulitzer Prize in the category of Feature Photography, and is said to be one of the most powerful images to capture the consequences of Africa's despair. Staring at the picture today, I ask, what is the balance? Seeking it will drain you emotionally, challenge your prayer life, and break your heart to find the answer.

I believe that the tension felt in the midst of a desperate search is an indication of balance.

When we arrive at some pre-calculated formulaic approach that resolves every challenge before it even arises, and which dictates whether we will act or not, and if so to what degree, we have lost the balance. The only way to know the balance is to get as close to Jesus as you can, and stay there. Only there will you hear the still, small voice, "This is the way, walk in it."

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SBJT: You have been living with an extremely serious illness. How has this changed your life and what have you learned that might help others facing similar illnesses?

Ted Cabal: Let me start by giving some background information to my present situation. I was diagnosed in 2001 with multiple myeloma, an incurable bone marrow cancer, at the age of 48. My mother had also received this diagnosis a year earlier. I already understood the grim implications when two of the best specialists in Louisville broke the news to me. They explained that I likely had at most three years to live. My variant of the disease was considered aggressive, and I faced the likelihood of attendant bone destruction.

Just about two years earlier I had moved my wife and sons from our extended family in Texas to Kentucky. Now our world was turned upside down. I was plunged into extremely debilitating treatments, including autologous stem cell transplant. This equivalent of a bone marrow transplant utilizes the patient's pre-harvested stem cells to "rescue" him from lethal doses of chemotherapy by regrowing his bone marrow. Years of treatments left me with the common side effects of chronic fatigue and "chemo brain" (the demonstrable loss of brain function). One drug caused periodic depression, something which I'd never experienced.

It has been thirteen years since I received this terminal diagnosis. I still have the disease. My doctors keep careful watch for the increasingly aggressive behavior typical of the disease, but at present I am doing remarkably well. I am so very humbled and grateful that the Lord has preserved me. Though he hasn't healed me, he hasn't called me home yet. Through it all he has taught me so very much which I now want explain.

First, let me describe some of my most difficult experiences of living with multiple myeloma. Immediately I dreaded that I had to break the news to my wife and sons that I would die sooner rather than later. I will never forget that day, unquestionably the most difficult of my life. Even now I can barely bring myself to ponder it. Watching my

family suffer with the news was far more painful than first hearing it. I so needed the Lord to help me provide them as much stability and perspective possible. Though they were extremely brave and godly in their responses, the first days were exquisitely sorrowful.

After the initial shock, a new reality set in for my wife and me. Spouses who love each other want to grow old together. But suddenly this hope was shattered. Our lives had been intertwined with memories and expectation of God's goodness, but it seemed now we only had the memories. We fully trusted our eternal future with the Lord, but death and the separation it brings are still our enemies. We had believed we should live each day as if our last, but that didn't change our being designed for living with future hope. I knew I would soon enjoy the full presence of the Lord, but I despised that I could do nothing for my dear wife. Thankfully, the Lord brought me to the place of entrusting him with my wife's future. And she and I have frequently discussed how dealing with such things without the hope of living forever with Jesus is almost unimaginable.

Though less important but still painful, I eventually realized some personal dreams were now impossible. I believed I was just entering the most productive period of my life. (Physical and mental health are such gifts!) Now due to the extreme physical and mental fatigue of treatments, some planned books became impossible to write. I would need time but eventually made peace with new limitations. His plans are better than mine.

For so long my focus had been on what the Lord might do through me rather than in me. But the hardest thing I've had to face is allowing the Holy Spirit to expose ugly sinfulness deep in my soul far worse than any cancer. I needed remolding in the character of Christ in my relationships with people far more than doing things for him. At diagnosis I was guarded by incomprehensible divine peace. I felt no fear and shared my hope in Christ with physicians and nurses. Thankfully that peace has never deserted me. But several

months later, I sensed the Lord telling me I was not exempted from the ongoing struggle of Christian transformation. Instead of peacefully waiting to die from cancer, I was to live with it in such a way that he could change me. "Living with" rather than "dying with" was going to be much tougher! In fact, my "darkest nights of the soul" have been in being brought face to face with myself. People, not goals matter most, and I am pained how often I still fail others. I'm a difficult project but the Lord accomplishes it by walking with me through the cancer valley. I am grateful for his resurrection power and infinite mercy operative in the otherwise impossible task of remaking me.

Second, let me describe a few things I have learned through my illness which may serve as a help to others who are also going through suffering in their own lives. Some days the only thing you can do is to take it easy on yourself. Sometimes it is quite the accomplishment to endure the day. Let endurance do its work on you. God is at work even when you can't.

Recognize God's love for you in the people he has placed in your life to help. I am deeply grateful for the Southern Seminary community which has been so kind to me through all this. I am so humbled and touched by students and churches regularly praying for me. And nothing so amazes me as the way my wife and I have grown closer through our suffering together. Be regularly reminded of God's love for you by appreciating His people in your life.

Gain perspective by recognizing how many others suffer much more than you. Don't shrink back from learning the stories of suffering people both near and far. Doing so will help you become softer rather than harder, better rather than bitter. Make it your personal project to alleviate someone else's suffering as much as you can.

Most of all, if you have been rescued by Jesus Christ, focus with all your might on his salvation. And by remembering how he has done so much for you even in this life, you can trust that he will keep his word to care for you in the future—even through all eternity.

SBJT: What advice can you give to help preachers preach about suffering?

Robert Vogel: Addressing the problem of suffering is one of the most prominent concerns in pastoral ministry. Thomas Oden writes,

No profession faces the direct question of the meaning of suffering more frequently than ministry. And no theological dimension of the pastor's work is more difficult. Theodicy remains among the most perplexing, practically pressing, and difficult of the theological issues of pastoral practice. Ultimately, it affects every other dimension in one's ministry.

No pastor can avoid these questions. They come with the territory. They arise inevitably as a result of the confluence of one's preaching ministry and caring ministries (*Pastoral Theology* [HarperCollins, 1983], 223).

As Oden notes, suffering frames major concerns of both the pastor's personal or "caring" ministry (e.g., visitation, counseling, intercessory prayer, etc.), and also his public ministry, the work of pastoral preaching.

The pervasive presence of suffering, due to both natural and moral evil, is evident in such life situations as illness, grief, poverty and other financial distress, natural catastrophes, broken relationships, persecution, abuse in its many forms, violence, war, cruelty, discrimination, oppression, hurtful speech, death—to name but a few causes.

Corresponding to the prevalence of suffering in life is its prevalence as a theme in Scripture. Before the Fall, God decreed that suffering (death) would be the consequence of sin, and the curse that accompanied the Fall inaugurated suffering in human experience. From Genesis forward, the Bible's storyline speaks to the reality of suffering. Words translated "pain," "anguish," "trial," "tribula-

tion," "affliction," "trouble," "sorrow," "weakness," "sick," "grief," and "distress" represent at least ten different words in the original languages related to suffering. The descriptive contexts in which such terms appear regularly feature the practical dimensions of suffering, and the believer's response to it.

Due to the prominence of issues of suffering both in Scripture and in life, the faithful expository preacher should expect naturally and regularly to address these matters in the course of his systematic preaching of the Bible. Such preaching equips believers for the time when the inevitable trial comes, for those particular occasions when suffering is an immediate congregational concern.

Claims of proponents of a health-and-wealth "gospel" notwithstanding, suffering is an inevitable part of life in a fallen world (Jas 1:2). The following advice is intended to strengthen preaching that addresses the reality of pain in a Christ-honoring way.

1. PREACH A BALANCED THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING.

Theological truths live in tension with one another. Thus it is important to keep in mind the teaching of the whole Bible on suffering when preaching upon one aspect of it. While a single sermon (from a particular text) may not address all matters of suffering, be careful not to present one part out of the context of the whole. For example, some suffering is disciplinary (Heb 12:4-11), but not all is (e.g., John 9:1-3; 2 Cor 12:7-10). Job's infamous friends wrongly understood God's purposes in Job's sufferings, and only compounded the misery of his affliction. Before the truth can be rightly applied to specific situations, it must be understood in its biblical, systematic fullness. Preaching that is so-balanced will prevent both preacher and hearers from taking an element of truth to an extreme of error.

2. PREACH EMPATHETICALLY; DON'T MINIMIZE OR TRIVIALIZE PEOPLE'S SUFFERING.

While authoritative biblical truth regarding life

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issues is always of primary importance, when it comes to the subject of pain, empathy from the preacher goes a long way in putting the truth across. "I feel your pain," carelessly spoken, is a laugh line; but when empathy is genuinely communicated, the message will be taken more seriously than as a mere matter of information.

A preacher's empathy with regard to suffering can be developed in a number of ways. First, when he is exegeting a passage speaking to the subject, careful attention to the mood of the text can help him identify the pain expressed in it. The terms used and the situations described, when carefully considered, can yield an empathy bearing the authority of God's Word.

In addition, the preacher can develop empathy through his ministry of personal soul care. As he listens to people in his congregation speak of their suffering, his pulpit descriptions, illustrations, and applications related to life's afflictions more effectively augment his proclamation of the authoritative message of the Word.

Empathy also develops as the preacher experiences suffering himself. This does not mean that he ought to quickly jump to tell his own story, but his experiences may temper the way he thinks and talks about life's pain. The preacher whose greatest "trial" involved a hangnail on prom night may have a hard time relating to the difficulties of real suffering experienced by members of his congregation.

3. PREACH WITH A PURPOSE TO STRENGTHEN FAITH THREATENED BY DOUBT IN TIMES OF TRIAL.

Considering the problem of suffering, a natural, though somewhat abstract, question is the "why" question. Theodicy seeks to resolve, as far as possible, the tension between the presence of suffering and the infinite love, goodness, and sovereign power of God. Inadequate answers, such as those given by Rabbi Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, may seek to resolve tension, but wind up diminishing some attribute(s) of God in the process.

When the broader, more abstract "why" question

becomes practical and personal, a suffering believer may ask, "why me?" This can be a dangerous question, if it implies the belief that God is not treating one fairly and if it leads one to doubt the goodness of God. The better question to pose is, "what now?" "Why me?" can bog down in a present, painful reality, whereas "what now?" seeks to move forward with a faithful response. "Why me?" feeds doubt; "What now?" expresses faith. While the preacher may seek to explain the problem of suffering in his exposition, the application in his message should feature the "what now?" perspective.

For example, 1 Peter speaks of suffering injustice at the hands of wicked oppressors in positions of power. One particular case involved servants with unreasonable masters (1 Pet 2:18-20). Rather than raising "why me?" questions about unjust treatment at the hands of such masters, Peter directs his readers to submit to them with respect and thus to find favor with God.

4. DIRECT SUFFERING PERSONS TO LOOK TO JESUS.

The strength to bear up under suffering is ultimately found in Jesus. Indeed, in the passage immediately following the above-cited 1 Peter text, Christ in His suffering is presented as an example for us to follow, "in his steps" (1 Pet 2:21-23). In this context, the suffering involved for Jesus was that of the Cross. Peter's readers would apply His example as they suffered injustice at the hands of others in the way that he did. More broadly, however, we will better understand the redemptive (sanctifying) purposes of God in our suffering as we look beyond the circumstances and focus on Jesus, our Redeemer, and the gracious purposes of our God (1 Pet 5:6-11).

5. BE A HERALD OF HOPE.

Pain and suffering can come from many possible sources (Jas 1:2). Some is the result of calamity in a temporal earth that groans under the curse. Physical sickness is the result of the sentence of death passed upon the human race at the fall. Moral evil enacted by human agents regu-

larly results in suffering afflicted on others. While the sources and kinds of affliction and suffering may vary, all find common ground in the truth that God is working out His gracious purposes in them, and that these trials cannot separate us from Him (Rom 8:28-39).

The preacher should regularly call his congregation to be people of hope in the long view. That is, rather than being consumed with the pain of the moment, we must be people who lift our eyes above the circumstances, fix our gaze on Jesus, and hope for the grace to be revealed at His coming. We must call our people to realize that these present afflictions are but for a time, and that ultimately God will establish perfect justice where injustice has prevailed for now. In our preaching, we must remind our people that God is using trials to produce the maturity of sanctification in us, and that he grants us wisdom to navigate the troubled waters in the meantime (Jas 1:2-8). In the face of grief and death, we proclaim that sorrow for the believer is tempered by the hope of the return of Jesus for His own—truth that offers genuine comfort in sorrow (1 Thess 4:13-18).

The reality of pain and affliction reminds us that our best life is not now. But faithful expository preaching provides true hope in this life, and for the life to come.

SBJT: How do you counsel someone who faces incredible suffering in their lives?

Heath Lambert: This is a good question. In fact, it's *the* question. Some of the most difficult counseling a person can do is the kind involving a person who is facing, or has faced, overwhelming sorrow. How do you offer genuine care that helps people turn a corner in a way that is patient, tender, and centered on Christ?

In my experience most people do not know how to do this. Many people keep a healthy distance between themselves and those going through intense pain because they are intimidated by the gut-wrenching nature of the pain and simply have no idea what to say. Others get close when they should keep their distance and offer shallow words and an easy fix that actually frustrates and complicates the emotions of suffering people. The church needs men and women who know how to offer care that helps people turn a corner in a way that is patient, tender, wise, and centered on Christ.

There is much we need to learn in order to be able to produce such men and women. In his Word, God has given Christian men and women many tools to do the slow and complex work of ministry to those with significant trials. Let me mention one tool that is available even though the church needs to know more than this one thing. Yet, I have seen God use this tool in the lives of many people to bring hope, comfort, and joy in the aftermath of anguish.

James 1:2 says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." This is one of the most controversial verses in the Bible. We are commanded to be joyful in the midst of various trials. The reason that is so controversial is because of all the varieties of overwhelming distress that can fit under the category of various trials. Women married to abusive men, children with life-altering birth defects, quadriplegics, rape victims, parents with children who have terminal cancer, folks struggling to overcome addictions to pornography, and people filing for bankruptcy are all facing trials of various kinds. The Bible's call in such situations is to count it all joy. That's controversial.

In fact it is so controversial that we need to be very careful how we use it. It probably isn't the first verse we will reference when ministering to people in pain. We will also want to avoid a cavalier attitude in referencing it. But we *will* use it. It is in the Bible, and God includes it as a crucial tool to help his people. In fact, the really encouraging

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thing about James 1:2 is that it makes it clear that joy is possible in trials. There is hope in knowing that no matter the degree of difficulty we face, we can also experience joy in distress.

The problem in counseling is that often people want to know *right now* how God can bring such joy out of their pain. As people who are finite, fallible, and frail we counselors will usually not know the particular answer to this question. But not knowing the details, however, of how God will use the details of their sorrow to produce specific joy, does not mean that we have nothing to say.

In fact, any Christian is equipped to point, even the most miserable sufferer, to joy by knowing who Jesus is and what he is doing. Think about it: the cross is the most extreme case of suffering that has ever existed, or that can be conceived. Jesus was a sinless sacrifice and the infinite God. He existed in eternal glory as an exalted member of the Trinity. He traded this splendor for a manger, a homeless existence, mockery, and ultimately, a cross. You can think of no higher example of suffering.

As intense as the pain was, however, this terrible act of moral evil will redound to endless glory and praise for this Christ, and endless ages of heavenly glory for us. Ironically, the worst act of wickedness—in the sovereign plan of God—becomes the most exalted act of good. In this terrible event countless Christians see the source of their endless delight.

This means that God is able to take the most horrific example of suffering and turn it into the most exalted source of joy. If God can do that, then sufferers can find hope. This reality means we have a word for every victim of childhood sexual abuse, every person defrauded in a financial con-scheme, every widow standing in the funeral. We can look to them, point them to the cross, and let them see the example that God knows how to bring joy out of their pain.

To sufferers in their grief, there are many things we can say and do. When we are at a loss for words, however, one reliable reality that will always be worth discussing is the powerful hope we can offer

to those in pain by seeing God's ability to turn even the worst act of wickedness for good.

SBJT: How can a pastor prepare his people for suffering?

David Schrock: When Peter wrote to the elect exiles scattered across Asia Minor, he told them not to be surprised by their “fiery trial ... as though something strange were happening to [them]” (1 Pet 4:12). Tragically, in a fallen world, suffering is to be expected. And for Christians, whose allegiance to Christ often increases suffering, Christ's flock is called to suffer well by receiving suffering as a gift and a gateway for amplifying the gospel (Phil 1:29; Col 1:24).

As a pastor, I think about suffering a lot. What pastor doesn't? We minister to saints who weep over unexpected funerals and all kinds of abuse. At the same time, we look out on our congregations each Sunday and pray that the sermon's message will equip them to enter a world filled with dangers, toils, and snares.

As D. A. Carson wisely observed, “All we have to do is live long enough, and we will suffer” (*How Long O Lord?*, 16). Because of its ubiquity, pastors must be prepared to address suffering—retrospectively and prospectively. In what follows, I will suggest five ways pastors can help their people prepare to suffer well.

First, pastors must highlight the theme of suffering in the Bible. Outside Eden

depravity, disease, and death are normal. So, pastors must routinely address the origin of suffering, God's solution, and the means of grace available to pilgrim saints (for an excellent treatment of suffering, see Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson, eds., *Suffering and the Goodness of God* [Crossway, 2008]). Pastors must help their people see that just as the head suffered so the body must as

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well. For Christ and his church suffering is the necessary prerequisite for glory (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17; 2 Tim 2:10; 1 Pet 5:10).

Suffering is not a sideline issue in the Bible. Scripture gives us barren women and blind sons, deadly storms and international wars. In addition to stories of suffering, the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, give us language to express our pain. At its center is Christ's agonizing death. To preach the Bible faithfully is to regularly address human suffering with the good news that death is swallowed up by Jesus' life.

Second, pastors must give their people a theology as big as God himself. In other words, for people to suffer well, they must stand on sound doctrine. In particular, pastors must gird their people with a theology that strengthens faith in God's sovereignty and hope in Christ's victorious return. While the particulars of suffering are a human mystery, it is vital to reassure believers that their plight has purpose. God is the author of the story, he "bottles" every tear (Ps 56:8), and he promises that the eternal weight of glory will recover every loss and heal every hurt (2 Cor 4:17).

Third, pastors must tie all suffering to Christ's death and resurrection. To every form of suffering, the cross is the answer. On the cross, Jesus bore God's wrath for our sins and he identified with humanities deepest pain—death. In this act of love, God dealt with the ultimate source of suffering and its deadly effect. For Christians, then, personal suffering is not God's testimony against us, as it was perceived to be under the old covenant. Rather, in Christ, suffering indicates our fellowship with our Lord (Phil 3:9-10) and God's fatherly love (Heb 12:3-11). Pastors must remind their people of this regularly. On a related side-note: If I were to add another priority for pastors, it would be helping Christians understand passages like Proverbs 10:22 ("The blessing of the LORD makes rich, and he adds no sorrow to it") in their covenantal context. Too much prosperity teaching and believing results from a failure to see the shift in suffering between the old and new covenants.

Fourth, pastors must inform their people about church history. The church victorious stands in heaven awaiting Christ's return. The church on earth suffers and bleeds. In our Western context, Christians need to hear the stories of faithful saints. Names like Ridley, Latimer, Elliot, and Saint should be as familiar as Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln.

A familiarity with church history reminds us that suffering is part of God's plan for his church. Wise pastors will illustrate Acts 14:22 and the book of 1 Peter with stories of John Bunyan's "voluntary" imprisonment, Horatio Spafford's "It is Well," and Richard Wurmbrand's injured feet. Access to these stories has never been easier, and the need for such courageous heroes has never been greater. North America's relative security has fostered an unrealistic view of suffering. Robert Yarbrough captures this point well when he writes about the laxity of twenty-first century, North American faith. He observes: "Healthy, well-fed, and gainfully-employed" Westerners have "lived relatively untouched by acute personal consciousness of many kinds and dimensions of suffering. Starvation, imprisonment for Christian faith, and being 'tortured for Christ' ... have sounded distant, exotic, and vaguely unnecessary" (see "Christ and the Crocodiles" in Morgan and Peterson, eds., *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, 27). So what we desperately need to be familiar with are saints who have suffered well, so that we might learn from them.

Fifth, pastors must call attention to the persecuted church. In obedience to God's word (Heb 13:3), pastors must lead the charge in praying for and supplying aid for persecuted Christians. Yet, the ministry of the persecuted church is not a one-way street. We must also champion the persecuted church because we need to see what it means to treasure Christ above life itself.

While Western Christians often look to the converted celebrity for inspiration, Scripture has a different witness in mind. According to Colossians 1:24, the man God uses to display his gospel is one who suffers deeply. As John Piper comments, "*God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to*

the world through the afflictions of his people” (Desiring God [Multnomah, 1996], 225).

In other words, Christians who love their enemies and pray for their persecutors bear witness to the gospel. Such suffering might include Christian celebrities ridiculed by secular reporters. But by comparison, Christians who have shed blood for their faith are the ones who need to teach us how to suffer. Western pastors must keep both lanes of ministry open with the perse-

cuted church: The persecuted church needs our aid, but we also need theirs.

In the end, a good theology of suffering strengthens our faith, but it doesn't eliminate the pain. In moments of affliction, we need a strong vision of God, but even more we need God himself, the father mercies and all comfort (2 Cor 1:3). In time this fallen world will afflict all of us. Therefore, let us, as Christ's under-shepherds, be passionate in preparing our people to suffer well.