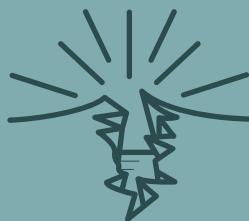




# TRUSTING GOD IN CRISIS: FAITH WHEN LIFE FALLS APART



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## Introduction

On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025, at approximately 6:39 AM, my dad called. He never calls at that time. The phone started buzzing on top of my nightstand, and I fumbled for it as it slipped to the floor. Swinging my legs out of bed, I reached down and grabbed the phone before it went to voicemail. “Hey, Dad,” I said, still pretty groggy. “Tay, I’m really sorry to have to tell you this, but Grammy passed away this morning.”

I couldn’t believe it. Surely not. Death can’t happen like that, right? You’re supposed to receive advanced warning. You’re supposed to have time to prepare yourself for a brand-new reality. In my case, my grandma was a hero to me. She taught me how to love God’s Word. She taught me the power of story. She taught me how to listen, love, and laugh. My grandma was simply the best, and much of who I am I owe to her. And she’s been gone for six months. . .

How many times over the course of a lifetime do you think life will feel like it’s falling apart? If you look back over your own life, how many times has it already felt like it’s fallen apart? For me, I think I can recall nine times when life felt like that. Now, of course, not all nine times were equal in severity. The question is not how many times life has fallen apart, but how many times it has *felt* like it’s fallen apart. So, nine for me, the ninth being my grandma’s passing. How many for you?

One time, my pastor and I were on a ministry trip. After dinner one night, he suggested we play a game that centered on family history. A round represented five-year increments, and each round would have each of us share everything we knew about our grandfather’s lives. The next night, we played the same game, only this time documenting our dads’ lives. Here’s what I learned: my grandpa and my dad have suffered a lot of losses in their lifetimes. I also learned that those losses seemed to increase in frequency as they aged. Something about life in this world, the longer it goes, requires more of you.

You pay with your heart. Family members you love pass away. The opportunities you wanted have gone to someone else. Things you never want to experience happen to you. . . or to someone you love. Life in this world is going to hurt. It’s going to feel like it’s falling apart. So, how many times for you? Here’s the reality. . . however many it is, it’s sure to be a growing number the longer you live. You will receive a call, a diagnosis, or a notification, and it will seem like all the air has leaked out of the room; like all the good in the world has turned to bad; like all the light the sun can produce has gone dark. What will you do then?

The answer to this question forms the burden behind this guide. At The Mentoring Project, we want to produce practical guides informed by biblical principles for the many life scenarios you will face and the life skills you will need. And yet, in a guide about suffering, I must warn you, whatever else I can say about how to cope with suffering will surely fall flat if you don’t know who God is and what role he plays in the most painful of life’s experiences. So, as you go through this guide with your

mentor/mentee, yes, ask questions about what to do and how to respond to suffering. But more importantly, ask questions about who your God is and what he has promised you in Jesus. The answer to this latter line of questioning will bear so much more fruit than any answer I may offer to the first line. Answers to both lines will be interconnected and present in all four parts of this guide. I pray you find it useful as you suffer today or prepare to suffer tomorrow.

So, what do we do when life falls apart?

## Part One: Lament

### *1. What is lament?*

Lament is not a word with a high usage rate in today's age. In fact, I would bet that most don't really have an idea about what lament is. At best, I think people know which emotion lament is most closely associated with—sadness. But lament isn't simply an emotion; it's an activity. Lament is giving expression and order to grief and sadness. It vocalizes and organizes emotional distress and pain. Admittedly, that is a somewhat abstract definition of lament. After all, when you're in a time of deep distress, you rarely feel like ordering or organizing anything, let alone the thing creating the distress.

The kind of ordering we're talking about here isn't what you do with your closets or pantry or toolbox when they become unruly—at least not entirely like that. It's not as though in order to lament, you must categorize every contributing factor and analyze each in order of priority. Instead, lament is order through exit. It happens when you reach into the grief and let it out by speaking—saying out loud what it is and how you feel about it.

Now, what you say can vary greatly based on the severity or kind of grief you're experiencing. Have you ever suffered a loss or felt a sadness so great that it seemed like all you could do was weep rather than speak? I have. Other times, lament means saying everything that can be said. This is what you do when you journal for pages on end about the sadness you're experiencing. It's what you do on a road trip, where it's just you and the windshield for hours, and yet, those hours don't seem sufficient to get it all out.

So, lament is order through exit in that it involves releasing grief by vocalizing it. It's also order through direction. By this, I mean that lament often comes with an expressed desire for how things could be better. "I wish this never happened..." "I wish I could bring him back..." "I wish I were something different..." I think we've all made "I wish" statements like these at one time or another. We grieve what is or what is not, and we wish it to be otherwise. No one had to teach us to do that; it comes naturally. We don't often have to remember to lament; we just do it as trouble presents itself.

### *2. How is lament helpful?*

One of the most pertinent examples of lament in the Bible comes from the book of Job. If you've grown up in church, you've likely heard of Job. From the first two chapters of the book of Job, we learn that Job was a wealthy man with a big family. More importantly, Job was upright before God. He trusted God and sought to serve God in everything he did. Surprisingly, it was precisely Job's character that qualified him to suffer unimaginable loss. At the hand of Satan, God allowed for everything to be taken from Job to prove that Job would refuse to curse God. In the testing, Job lost his property and his possessions. Worse yet, he lost his children in a tragic windstorm that brought a

roof down over their heads. Satan was even allowed to strike Job's body, covering him with painful sores from head to toe. If anyone could say that their life fell apart, it was Job.

What was Job's response to such staggering loss? He sat silently on the ground for seven days and nights while his friends stared at him, having not one clue as to what they could say to ease his pain (Job 2:13). After a week of silent suffering, Job spoke, and what he said was a chilling lament. His first words were: "Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man is conceived'" (Job 3:1). Later in the same soliloquy, Job asks, "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?" (Job 3:11). And again Job asks, "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not. . ." (Job 3:20-21a).

For Job, dying at birth would be better than living a long life because he would have avoided suffering. It's not that death is better than life generally, but that death is better than Job's life, which had become utterly intolerable. There is much we could say about God and suffering and Job, but for now, we need to focus on what Job's lament teaches us about lament in general.

Job's example helps us see lament as a good first step in responding when life falls apart. Suffering creates disorientation and chaos. No matter how hard we try to wrestle our feelings with our words, sometimes our words fail to sum it all up. And yet, our words help us begin to process, begin to understand, or at least accept what is. In Job's case, it took a week of silence to get to the place where he could say anything at all, and what he said wasn't exactly in the realm of rationality. Just read Job 3. He wished all the natural order had protested and prevented his birth! Lament doesn't always have to be rational because lament isn't where the process stops, but where it begins. As you grieve your losses and respond to your pains, you don't want to be perpetually in a state of lament. Rather, you want to eventually accept what has happened, trust the Lord's providence in it, and help others follow Jesus through what you learn from your own suffering. Lament leads to all these things.

The world offers many alternatives to honest lament. There's the bottle-it-up approach, which says if you ignore the pain, it will eventually go away. But time doesn't heal all wounds, and it definitely doesn't heal all wounds properly. Like failing to set a broken bone can lead to walking with a limp, bottling up pain will cause perpetual problems for you in life and in your walk with the Lord.

Another alternative to lament is the distract-yourself approach, which says if you simply pursue other pleasures or bury yourself at work, then grief will eventually get choked out. There is a long line of brokenness associated with this approach. Grief too often acts as an assailant, ready to attack without warning. To fend grief, you're too often driven deeper and deeper into your distraction until eventually your distraction turns around and bites back. You can only pursue drugs, sex, gambling, serial shopping, overworking, or any other distraction for so long before you're pinned between it and your grief. One or the other will win out.

Don't bottle up your grief. Don't try to distract yourself until it goes away. Instead, lament.

### 3. How does God perceive our lament?

My friends, God invites us to bring our laments to him. Our lament over our own brokenness and the brokenness that surrounds doesn't intimidate or anger him. Instead, he receives us as a good father does his hurting child. One of the sweetest portions of Jesus's teaching occurs when he says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). In some sense, lament is wrapped up in his invitation to "come". Do you have burdens and sorrows that seem too heavy to carry? You should come to Jesus. He will not despair of you or turn you away. Instead, he will give you rest.

Sadly, many Christians are under the impression that God looks down on lament. But the Bible is full of examples of lament. An entire book in the Bible is called *Lamentations*! Just look at the Psalms—nearly half (65 or so) are committed laments before God.

I think there are two reasons for this: one personal and one corporate. Personally, Christians may feel like trusting in the Lord is somehow incompatible with lament that is proportionate to their pain. "If the Lord is sovereign over every detail of my life (which he is!), then I just need to grit my teeth and believe in his good purposes without getting down about how much it currently hurts!" Yes, God is sovereign. And yes, God knows exactly what he will accomplish by allowing us to suffer.

But his sovereignty over suffering does not leave him cold or impatient with us when we express our sorrows to him. King David writes in Psalm 103, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:13-14). God may know what our suffering will mean in the end, but he also knows that we don't know right now. He knows that we can't see the whole picture. So, he invites us to lament to him even as we fight for faith. So, don't feel embarrassed to lament to God. Your sadness over suffering is not a contradiction to your faith.

I think another reason that Christians have forgotten to lament is because churches have forgotten to lament on the Lord's Day. Many Christian worship services are aimed at unbelievers or are tuned to surface-level Christianity. The result is gatherings that are chipper and upbeat but leave no room for lament. Like churches should pray prayers and sing songs of confession of sin and praise to God, so they should also lament. At my church, we routinely have a prayer of lament followed by a song that emphasizes God as a comforter to his people. Over time, I have learned how to pray prayers of lament by listening and praying alongside those who have led these prayers during our Sunday morning gatherings. If your church has forgotten to lament, your fellow members are likely tempted to forget as well.

Lament is not simply verbal processing, though it is not less than that. Lament is taking our burdens to the God who hears and cares. David laments in Psalm 42: "My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God? . . . Why are you cast down, O my soul,

and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Ps. 42:3, 5). Lament reminds us that God is our salvation, and he will not fail us.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. Do you find lament difficult? Why or why not?
2. How can lament help you process your grief before God?
3. Read Psalm 3, 13, 32, and 44. What stands out to you about these songs of lament?
4. Have you ever tried an alternative like ignoring or distracting yourself from pain? How has that worked?

## Part Two: Learn Who God Is

So, when life feels like it's falling apart, we should lament. We should also remember who God is. God is sovereign, just, and savior.

### 1. *God is sovereign.*

When I was a teenager trying to follow Jesus, I struggled to understand how God could be sovereign over a world full of sin and suffering. To be honest, I still struggle with that concept, but not in the same way as I used to. You see, before, I wasn't aware of how pervasive God's sovereignty is in the Bible. I think I probably assumed the Bible was as embarrassed by God's sovereignty as I was. After all, how could we think that God is somehow sovereign over so many terrible things that happen in this world and our lives? Surely, these things are simply the result of sin and have nothing to do with God, right? Well... yes and no.

It's true that suffering is the result of sin. Paul wrote to the Romans, "Therefore just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—" (Rom. 5:12). So, in one sense we may explain human suffering, which is a precursor to death, as being the result of human action—namely, sin against God.

In another sense, however, we must confess with the Scriptures that God is sovereign over sin and suffering. It would far exceed the boundaries of this guide for me to fully defend that assertion. But let me give you two pieces of evidence that confirm God is in fact sovereign over everything—sin and suffering included. First, there is Jesus' cross. What is Jesus's cross in response to? Our sin.

Again, Paul makes it clear in Romans 5 that just as sin entered the world through Adam (Gen. 3), so life comes through Christ's life and death on the cross (Rom. 5:19). And Christ's death on the cross was not God's plan B, evoked as an emergency response to Adam's sin. Rather, Luke writes, "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). So, before the world was established, God intended to offer his only son, the Lord Jesus, on behalf of sinners, which presupposes sin would enter this world.

Second, God's Word regularly teaches that God is sovereign over sin and suffering. This is nowhere more apparent than in the book of Job. Famously, after Job lost everything he knew and loved, he blessed God and said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. . ." (Job 1:21). But wait Job, wasn't it Satan who caused all your suffering? Well, Job didn't know of the exchange between God and Satan, which led to his losses. And yet, throughout the book, Job insisted on hearing an explanation not from Satan but from God himself. When God finally answered Job's request, he happily asserted his sovereignty over all of creation, including death and Satan (see divine speeches in Job 38-41). Job responded to God's sovereignty of his suffering by saying, "I know you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can

be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:2-3). Neither Job nor God ran from the reality that Satan was subordinate to God alone. Job's sufferings and restoration stand as clear evidence that God is sovereign over even the most difficult things in life.

Why does this matter? For one, it matters because God's sovereignty guarantees victory. Imagine if God was not sovereign over your life when it fell apart. . . who was responsible for your calamity? Who ultimately approved of your trial, and what plan does your trial accord with? My friend, God is good and sovereign and, as Job confessed, no plan of his can be thwarted. You don't want a god who can be beaten. You don't want a god who answers to someone else. You want a big, sovereign God who works all things for his purposes.

## 2. *God is good.*

One of the concerns about monarchy is whether the monarch is good or evil. You see, absolute power wielded by an evil king is dangerous for all who find themselves under him. God is not a wicked king. In fact, there is no impurity in him. Moses said of God, "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he" (Deut. 32:4). What's more is that there is no being like him. Only God defines moral goodness because only God is morally perfect. That is, in part, what we mean when we say God is holy. We're communicating that God is totally alone in moral perfection and, as we learned in the previous section, absolute power. That is why we do not need to fear God's sovereignty, as though he will ever use his power to do what is not right.

When your life falls apart, you may be tempted to think that God is using his sovereign power to commit evil against you. My friend, God is sovereign *and* good. He does no evil. Your suffering may be the result of your sin or the sins of others, but it is never the result of God's sin because God does not sin. When you're in the trenches and your life is in shambles, you must know that God is good. It is this fact that you may be most likely to doubt or deny, but it is this fact that the Bible teaches over and over again.

I recently had the chance to share the gospel with an agnostic who had previously believed in Jesus but later apostatized because he couldn't understand how God could allow so much death and bloodshed in the Old Testament. One of the key examples he cited was Noah and the ark. "How could God flood the earth when it was full of innocent people?" my friend asked. I said to him, "Perry, the problem is with that word innocent. There are no innocent people. We, unlike God, are morally compromised. We do not love what we should, and we love what we shouldn't. The reason it's such a big deal is that God is infinitely good. He isn't partly upright; he is eternally upright. And we have offended him. His judgement on humanity is right because he is right and we are wrong." I wish I could report that Perry was convinced that day, but he wasn't.

There is a day coming for me, Perry, and you when we will stand before this morally perfect God and give an answer for how we've lived our lives. What do you think you'll say when you face his goodness and know yourself to be everything other than good? To be safe from God's good judgement over your sin, you must put your trust in Jesus. You see, God poured out his wrath against sin on Jesus for all those who would turn from their sin and trust in him. If you are trusting in Jesus, then you will not face judgement but instead will receive God's goodness, which is yours in Christ.

### *3. God has promised good to those who trust in Jesus.*

Romans 8:28 is routinely printed on coffee cups, pens, and t-shirts. This verse's popularity is not without good reason. Paul wrote to the Romans, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). *All things?!* Yes, all things. Including those things which have caused my life to feel like it's falling apart? Yes, even those things. God has promised heavenly good for everyone who loves him. He has promised to work everything out for the good of those who are called according to his purposes.

My wife and I prayed for children for years, but it seemed as though God wasn't listening. We were diagnosed with "unexplained infertility", which means that, as far as a doctor can see, there is no reason why we shouldn't be able to have kids. And yet, we were childless.

Then, one day, my wife announced to me that we were pregnant. It was as though heaven finally heard and responded to our many requests. We were going to have a family. We praised the Lord from the mountaintops. We told our families. We moved homes so we'd be better prepared for our baby's arrival.

A handful of weeks later, sitting with my wife's hand in mine, we were given the terrible news that our baby didn't make it. Her hand tightened around mine. The air leaked out of the room. The doctor offered his condolences and then stepped out to give us some space. When the door closed behind him, my wife began to wail. Even recalling it for you now is bringing up a deep sadness that I feel over the loss of that little one.

Our lives felt like they had fallen apart. Where was our God, who promised *all* things would work out for us? We loved him, didn't we? We were committed to serving him! Was he toying with us all this time? Hearing our prayers and delaying the answer just to build suspense, so that he could give and then take away just a couple of months later? These were the questions we were asking. This was the grief that we were lamenting.

My wife and I now have five children whom we adopted in 2023. They are beautiful, and we are overjoyed to be their mom and dad. As I think back on our infertility and loss, I am made to praise the Lord because, while I didn't know how he was going to work everything out for our good (and our children's good!), God did. He wasn't punting on his promise to us. He was arranging our lives to

intersect with our children's lives. He was putting our family together according to his wisdom, not ours.

If you love God and are called according to his purpose, then you have his personal guarantee that he is working everything out for your good. Now, what "good" means is for him to decide. Here's what you can bet on, though—God's goodness to you is not less than eternity with him in his joy. God has promised to work out your life here so that you spend eternity with him there. Your life will fall apart. You will suffer sorrow. But God will use all of it for his glory *and* your good.

Corrie ten Boom wrote the poem "My Life Is but a Weaving." I have returned to her words more times than I can say in response to suffering. She writes:

My life is but a weaving  
Between my God and me.  
I cannot choose the colors  
He weaveth steadily.

Oft' time He weaveth sorrow;  
And I in foolish pride  
Forget He sees the upper  
And I the underside

Not 'til the loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly  
Will God unroll the canvas  
And reveal the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful  
In the weaver's skillful hand  
As the threads of gold and silver  
In the pattern He has planned

He knows, He loves, He cares;  
Nothing this truth can dim.  
He gives the very best to those  
Who leave the choice to Him.

Will you leave the choice to your sovereign, good, saving God?

### **Reflection questions:**

1. How does knowing God is over your suffering help you endure it?
2. Does suffering make you doubt God's goodness? Why?
3. What comfort do you find in knowing that God promises to work out everything for your good?

## Part Three: Lean on God and Others

In January 2025, my parents' lives fell apart. The culprit? A tree fell on their house. I'm not talking about a little branch or a small sapling, okay? It was a 30,000-pound oak tree. Thankfully, it hit the chimney before smashing through the roof. The contractor said that if it had hit the roof first, it would have split the house and gone straight into the basement. Even still, the damage caused by that tree is currently north of \$250,000. My parents have been out of their house for six months and have no idea when the repairs will finally be complete, allowing them to return home. They've suffered a lot.

Even in the face of suffering, I have been so encouraged by how they have leaned on the Lord and others for help. This trial in their lives has not deflated them or caused them to doubt God's goodness. In fact, they've leaned into God's promises to them and allowed others to be Christ's hands and feet for them.

In this section, I want us to think about how we can lean on God and others for help when our lives feel like they're falling apart.

### *1. Rely on God's Word.*

Jesus's sermon on the mount is probably the most famous sermon of all time. Jesus concluded that address by drawing a comparison between two houses: one which was built on rock and another which was built on sand. In the case of both homes, "the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew. . ." (Matt. 7:25, 27). The outcomes of both homes, however, were drastically different. The house built on the rock "did not fall" but stood defiantly against the storm. The house built on sand, on the other hand, not only fell but "great was the fall of it" (Matt. 7:27). Which was the house built on the rock? Jesus said this house represents those who "hear these words of mine and do them..." (Matt. 7:24).

So, what about you? What will you build your life on? The options are admittedly endless. You could build on money, fame, power, popularity, skill, family, sex, or a whole host of other things. Or, you could build your house on the rock that is God's Word. Unapologetically, Jesus says that if you choose the latter, you're a "foolish man" (or woman) (Matt. 7:26). Why might that be?

Well, for one, the long list of options I just gave you, and whichever ones I didn't mention but you'd want to add, have one thing in common—they're all fleeting. Okay, two things in common—they're fleeting and they fail to finally satisfy your deepest longings. God's Word is not subject to either of these criticisms. Isaiah writes, "The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Is. 40:7-8). You see, unlike these alternatives, God's Word is enduring.

God's Word is also perfectly satisfying. Jeremiah writes, "let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord" (Jer. 9:24). Your riches or possessions or influence are not worth boasting. They are cheap in comparison to the surpassing value of understanding and knowing God. How might you grow to understand and know God more? By spending time in his Word.

If you're not accustomed to reading God's Word, let me recommend that you take at least fifteen minutes every day to read a few chapters. As you read, ask yourself questions about what you're reading has to do with God, yourself, and the people around you. Ask yourself how what you're reading applies to your life. If you have questions about what something means, jot those down and then ask your pastor or mentor to help you understand. There is nothing more worthwhile than spending time with God in His Word. When your life falls apart, you will find that if you've spent time learning and obeying God's Word, you'll be like the rich man whose house is built on the rock.

## *2. Pray for God's help.*

I recently led my small group in a study through the book of James. Though I've read God's Word for a long time, I was struck anew by how bold James was in his instruction to us regarding how we ought to pray. He tells us in James 4:2, "You do not have, because you do not ask." Then in James 5:16, James writes, "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." Translation? Prayer is a really big deal.

When you are in a situation where you feel like your life is falling apart, you should pray. I know that sounds simple, but I'm serious. You need to pray for God's help. David writes, "In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears" (Ps. 18:6). Your cry will also reach his ears. So when you're facing distress, call out to God for help. Here are a few things you can ask him for:

- That God would receive glory from your suffering.
- That God would use your suffering to strengthen your faith.
- That others would see your faith and believe in your God.
- That you would have the wisdom to know how to handle various decisions in front of you.
- That God would bring you out of your suffering soon.

## *3. Lean on God's people.*

Remember my mom and dad's situation with the tree falling into their house? One of the most encouraging aspects of that trial has been the way members of their church have truly loved them through it all. They have people offer them homes, food, gift cards, help with cleaning up the property, and money for repairs. More importantly, people have shared Scripture with them and prayed to God on their behalf. On and on, the help has come.

Are you plugged into a church where your fellow members are committed to your spiritual and physical well-being? If not, you need to be. The Christian life wasn't meant to be lived alone. Don't believe me? Go read the epistles and ask yourself how you would obey all of God's commands by yourself? "Live in harmony with one another" (Rom. 12:16). "Encourage one another and build one another up" (1 Thess. 5:11). "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another" (1 Pet. 4:10). The Bible's teaching on the Christian life simply assumes that you're living it out with others. You realize how important others truly are to your spiritual well-being when it's time to suffer.

I remember once suffering because of my own sin. The consequences of my sin were great, and through them I really realized how wrong I had been. In the sadness of that season, I had a seventy-eight-year-old friend named Junior. Junior had been a Christian for a long time when we met, and while he wasn't

much into reading old theology books, he was really committed to showing me the love of Christ. He drew near to me, helped me around my house, sat with me in my sadness, and encouraged me to take my struggles to the Lord in prayer. Junior was an example to me, and in his example, I saw God's love for me. Everyone needs a Junior. In fact, everyone needs churches full of Juniors who go around looking for ways to encourage one another to keep going.

One way we facilitate this kind of care at my church is through our church covenant. It's extremely old, but very effective in underscoring for each of us what we've committed to one another. We renew this covenant with one another every time we take the Lord's Supper and before our membership meetings. Here is just a snippet of our covenant:

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church, exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other, and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.

We will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, nor neglect to pray for ourselves and others.

We will endeavor to bring up such as may at any time be under our care, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of our family and friends.

We will rejoice at each other's happiness and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

Your church may not have a covenant, but you should be characterized by a covenantal commitment to one another. When you're facing trouble, you need a church full of believers who are absolutely in it for you. So, whether you're suffering now or are waiting for your next round, lean into God's people in the context of a healthy church. Often it is through God's people that we most palpably feel God's presence and receive his help.

### **Reflection questions:**

1. How has your time in God's Word been lately? Are you struggling to see its relevance? Are you growing in your understanding of who God is and what he expects from you?
2. How has God's Word brought you comfort in trials and suffering?
3. What does time in prayer look like for you? Do you struggle with distractions? If so, talk with your mentor about how you might grow in this spiritual discipline.
4. What does your current relationship with your church look like? How could you be more intentional about loving those saints?
5. How have you seen God's people rally to care for you when you've suffered?

## Part Four: Love Others with Your Story

I once met a woman named Tina. Tina's childhood was marked by abuse and abandonment. Her mother was a person with schizophrenia who often had to be institutionalized, leaving Tina and her brothers to fend for themselves. Tina never met her father but did know and love her brother's father as her own. That is, until he took off when she was ten. Between the ages of ten and eighteen, Tina can recall more than a dozen foster homes waiting for her mom to get out of the hospital. Most tragically, Tina was sexually abused by a sheriff, the sheriff's son, and her pastor.

Her story turns my stomach and brings tears to my eyes. How could anyone treat a child so horribly? By God's grace, Tina heard and believed the gospel when she was twelve years old. Even though she suffered so much from that time until she was old enough to leave her hometown, she never stopped trusting in Jesus, believing that he would save her. As an adult, Tina has counseled and cared for countless women with similar backgrounds. I once heard her say, "I am humbled to have been counted worthy to suffer so much so that I could help so many who have suffered similar things." Wow. That is an amazing testimony of God's grace.

### *1. God uses our grief for others' good.*

I wonder if you've thought about how God might want to use your story to help others who have suffered like you have. Your story may not be exactly like Tina's, but like Tina, God intends to use your story to help others also. I once heard it said by a pastor that God never wastes our pain. I think that's true in more ways than one. It's true that God uses our pain for our good by making us more like Jesus through it. It's also true that he uses our pain to help others grow to be more like Jesus through the pain of their own.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4). Did you notice the connection between our being afflicted and yet comforted so that we might be a comfort to the afflicted? What this connection shows us is threefold: 1. That God is the God of comfort. 2. That God brings comfort to the afflicted. 3. That the relationship between God and his people is so close that God can meaningfully deliver comfort to one of his afflicted children by another.

Do you want to be used by God? Then use your own sufferings to help others who are suffering. Use the comfort that God brings you to comfort others. Practically, this could mean giving counsel or encouragement to someone suffering. More often, though, this means sitting with the person whose life has fallen apart, telling them that you love them, and committing to pray for and care for them in whatever way you can.

### *2. Seek to give God glory for your afflictions.*

This one seems counterintuitive. Giving God glory for blessings? Easy. That makes sense. Giving him glory for suffering? That's a bit harder to figure out. Enter James. James was writing to a number of suffering Christians about what they should do with their suffering. He said to them, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (Jas. 1:2). Count it all joy? Why would trouble propagate joy?

James writes, “for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas. 1:3-4). Suffering leads to Christlikeness, and Christlikeness is most to be valued.

I think we can go a little deeper with the relationship between your suffering and Christlikeness. The hallmark of Christ’s ministry to us is his suffering and dying in our stead. Notice how Paul connects Christ’s suffering with his own and how he sees both serving the common interests of God’s people. He writes to the Colossians, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings. . .” Sounds like James, right? “. . . for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24). The idea of “filling up what is lacking” is not an indication that Christ’s sufferings are insufficient. Rather, Paul understands himself to be a partner with Christ in Christ’s ministry of building up his body. And this ministry, which Christ and Paul have, is uniquely tied to suffering.

This ministry is not just Christ’s and Paul’s. It’s also yours and mine. So often when we suffer, our temptation is to turn inward, focusing on our own distress. To be fair, there is a place for this. After all, I led this guide with a section on lament. And yet, in order to join Christ and Paul’s ministry of suffering for the building up of the body, you have to think beyond yourself for others’ sake. If you’re not accustomed to caring for others amid your own trouble, let me encourage you to start today.

I remember talking to my grandmother one afternoon, just a few days after learning our baby was gone. She compassionately challenged me to consider how Rachel and I might use our suffering for the good of others. She even suggested that we try and bless another couple in our church who were where we wanted to be—anticipating the arrival of their baby. At first, I brushed her off. “Yeah, okay, Grammy. Thanks for that!” Later that week, I met my friend Darren. Darren and his wife, Krystal, had been members of our church for more than a decade and had a large circle of friends. However, since we were new, Darren and Krystal invited my wife and me to dinner. As we passed over the 395 bridge into Virginia on our way to a burger joint in Arlington, Krystal told us that they were expecting their first. Then she told us the due date. My heart sank. She was exactly as far along as Rachel should have been.

For however much I wanted out of the car, I’m sure Rachel wanted out even more. The rest of the evening was okay. They didn’t know about our loss, and we didn’t say anything. When we got back to our apartment, I assumed the evening was a misfire and that we’d find friends elsewhere. However, Darren shortly thereafter reached out to hang out again. I didn’t want to. But I remembered my grandma’s words in the back of my mind and said yes. Over the next six months, we became fast friends with Darren and Krystal. They were generous about including us in their preparation for their son, Sam. Sam is like a nephew to Rachel and me now. I cannot express how much good the Lord did to us through Darren and Krystal, even as we tried to do good to them.

If the Lord has allowed suffering to come into your life, my friend, it guarantees that he has reasons for it that go beyond you. What a blessing that God intends to use you. So, as he does, give him glory. Join Paul and rejoice in your sufferings, which are for the building up of the body. Listen to James and count it all joy when you suffer. It’s not wasted.

### **Reflection questions:**

1. What is the relationship between your suffering, Christ’s suffering, and the suffering of other Christians in your life?

2. Is there anyone you think the Lord is leading you to encourage or come alongside amid their trials?
3. How can you start giving God glory for how he has allowed you to suffer?
4. What prayer requests can you share with your mentor/mentee specific to loving others with your story?

## Conclusion:

If you live long enough, life will eventually fall apart. It's going to get tough. You're going to lose. You're going to hurt. You're going to fall down. The good news? God has provided everything you need in Jesus and in his people in order to persevere. So, lament before him. Learn more about God's character and allow his character to inform your suffering. Lean on God and on his people. And lastly, love others who are suffering similarly.