

# What If Suffering Is a Gift?

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I thought this evening I might add a concluding message to the various messages that we've done on trusting God over the past two weeks. I'll be away from the pulpit this Sunday and Nathaniel will be here. I'm going to be out of town ministering someplace else and so there's kind of an open slot here that I just wanted to fill with a kind of a concluding message on the matter of trusting God as we've seen from Proverbs 3 and Matthew 6 and Sunday's message and now tonight. I want to ask a rhetorical question and then answer it. What if suffering is a gift? What if suffering is a gift? What we saw on Sunday from the book of Habakkuk, "Trusting God in Trying Times," we saw that God sent affliction in the hidden ways of his providence to accomplish greater ends. And we need answers when we're suffering. We need something that our hearts can latch onto to persevere in. Scripture says that, you know, a man can bear his sickness, but a broken spirit, who can bear that? And so my desire tonight is speak to people over the live stream as well as here in the room, is to try to give you a few things to be able to meditate on, to think upon, to give you perspective on suffering. If you have hope, you can deal with anything. If you have hope, you can deal with the suffering. But if you have no hope, then things become black indeed. If everything about your earthly life is bound up with earthly things and earthly relationships and those things turn sour, then you're kind of left holding the bag with no place to go.

And so tonight I'm bringing a very broad message. It's a topical message, you could say. A broad message for Christians and non-Christians alike. I want this to have as much universal application as it possibly can. Maybe it becomes a message that you can share with others. What I want to do, just for the sake of the outline and the sake of rhetoric, I'm going to speak about suffering broadly. My whole point is very broad to address all manner of suffering, however you would define it in your own life, but I'm going to speak about it in more specific terms in the form of bodily illness, just to give us a unifying theme but whenever I talk about bodily illness, we can think about it in broad terms of affliction and adversity, so that every one of us has something to glean from what I say here this evening. And I plan to just give you five points here this evening to start with and the first one is this, and I'll try to go through these rather quickly, I guess. Just again, just stimulating thought, giving you something to think about, to meditate upon, hopefully to say, "I hadn't thought about it quite like that. That's an angle that I can consider and find some usefulness in." And so let's dive into it, shall we?

First of all, I want to say that God designed your illness for you. God designed your illness for you. God designed your specific form of adversity for you and we draw great, great comfort from this. This immediately turns everything on its head because God sends to us everything that happens in our lives. God sends to us everything that happens in our lives. Now, weak theologians and sometimes well-meaning but misinformed Christians try to exonerate God from responsibility when bad things happen. They say, well, you know, there is Satan and, you know, God loves us but he can't control everything and human will and blah, blah, blah, this and that. That's not at all the perspective of the Bible, and it's not at all helpful for us when we're looking for real, solid, substantial hope. The Bible says that God works all things after the counsel of his own will, Ephesians 1:10. God's hand is at work in absolutely everything that happens. His will has established the course of our lives, the course of the world, the course of the universe, and as these things progress, as our lives progress, as difficulties come and go, God is working all things according to what he finds wise and finds necessary for us in the life that he has given to us. That's a great comfort. It's a great refuge to realize that we are not subject to random forces of impersonal fate. We are not subject to, ultimately to the evil that someone does to us. There is an overriding purpose from a wise God, a good God, a great God, a loving God, and he is working all things after the counsel of his will. This is a very broad point so that you could look at anything whatsoever in your life, and say, somehow, maybe in a way that I don't understand, the hand of God is at work in what's happening to me today.

You see, my friends, your illness is no accident, it is no bad luck, or simply a product of genetics; that happens sometimes, but there's more to it than that. God is not like that. Those terms of accident or bad luck or fate are all very bad terms, even though they're common in our parlance, those terms suggest that impersonal forces have intervened into your life, and you're subject to things that are random and have no purpose and certainly no purpose of love in what you are facing. But Scripture does not teach any of that. Scripture teaches us that there is a God and that he is there and that this God is wise, he is sovereign, meaning he has control over everything that happens, and he is personally involved with every detail. Scripture says in Psalm 139:13 and 14 that God is present in the womb of a mother forming the bones of her child; in the very depths of the womb, the Lord is working out his purposes. Once you're outside the womb, you could say that in the language of Jesus in Matthew 10, that the very hairs of your head are numbered. From the very beginning, in the most intimate details, God is at work. If God counts the hair on your head, he's reasoning from the lesser to the greater, if he would count the hairs on your head, then isn't it obvious that he's also intimately involved with the more pressing matters that affect us?

He's watching over everything and so, my friend, what happens to your physical body, as we're talking about this using illness as an illustration of the greater point, what happens to your physical body is part of his care for you is part of him working out his purpose for you and so that means something really significant. That faulty physical heart that you have, that cancer that has come to you, the mental weakening that comes with advanced age, maybe the loss of motor functions and all of that, beloved, God has designed that. God is working in that. God is doing something and using that illness for your benefit.

He's working to accomplish something. The great thing to understand, and I will never get tired of saying things like this, as long as the Lord gives me breath. What you're facing with your difficulty, my beloved friend, this is no unexpected development. This did not come out of left field from the perspective of God because he has planned it and he is working out his purpose.

So let's stop there for a moment and just deal with an imaginary objection that's really not so imaginary. I'm just using this as in the form of rhetoric, but this is something that troubles people. If we stop there and just say, well, God planned it all and God sent this to you, if that's all we said, you might very well resent God and hate the message that I'm giving to you. "This is difficult and God sent it to me? I don't like this God that you speak of." But we need to continue on. We need to think through things because we can't just view it from the perspective of the difficulty or the pain that we're experiencing in the moment and pain not only of a physical nature but certainly of an emotional heart nature as well, all of these things, God has his purpose in them and he is sovereign over every detail, but this actually gives us hope. Scripture says that for those who love him, God works all things together for good. All things that are come to us is something that God is working together to accomplish his purpose and even when, my friends, even when ungrateful family members, let's say, cause you heart pain, or when people do wrong and sinful, evil things that have a great impact on your life, and they, even if they intend to do you harm, as often people do in this cursed world in which we live, Scripture still gives us a refuge for that in Genesis 50:20. Joseph said after his brothers had done so much evil to him and caused him so much heartache and pain, he could forgive them at the end of his life or toward the end of his life when he said, "You meant evil against me but God meant it for good." God has an overriding purpose in the midst of your illness.

He has an overriding purpose in the midst of the affliction and the suffering that it brings and I don't expect you to necessarily see that and identify the specific reason for it in the midst of the suffering, and by like manner, I would hope that you wouldn't expect me to know that and explain that to us. The Bible says secret things belong to the Lord but we don't have to know the specifics to know the general purpose and direction. God designed your illness for you. He's at work in your illness and through your illness and when you grasp that principle, it opens up a whole world of different questions for you. Instead of saying, why me, and fearfully asking what's going to happen to me, you can ask different questions. Well, if that's true, if what Scripture says about this is true, then you can ask a question like this, "God, what do you have for me in this as I look to the future?" The future may be brief if it's a terminal illness, but you do have a little bit of time to put things into order in your heart and in relationships as much as you can. You have a window of time here, and God has a purpose for it. Now, beloved, when you see that, a door has been cracked open for you that you can grab hold of the handle and open and walk through. You can be done with the resentment and the fear and start seeking out with serious intent the purpose that God has for you and those kinds of thoughts lead you to the Bible for answers. And so God has a purpose. God designed this for you. This is not random. It's not an accident. You're not a helpless victim of circumstances beyond your control. God is doing something. God has a purpose for you that he is looking to accomplish.

That's our first point, God designed your illness for you. Now, my second point is going to be primarily for Christians, I guess. You could say this, I added this at literally at the last minute you could say, but I thought that there was something important to be said here, speaking to Christians who are used to, who have been conditioned to view prayer, follow me closely here, I'm speaking to Christians especially who have been conditioned to use prayer as a way of getting immediate relief from the difficulties that they face. "God, get me out of this problem. God, heal my weakness. God, heal my disease." You know, and it's just, "God, fix this, fix what's affecting me, fix my suffering, make it go away so that I can go back to feeling comfortable and being healthy all over again." Well, we need to deal with that and at this point, for people with that perspective, this message is going to get harder before it gets better, but this is something that we really need to deal with. So the second point here is I'm going to put it like this. It's going to be a long sentence. Often we want out when God wants us in. We want out when God wants us in and we need to come to grips with the fact that God has purposes for us in our suffering.

Let me just take you to a small handful of passages. You can open in your Bible to Psalm 119:67. Psalm 119:68. There's a lot about suffering and adversity in Psalm 119. We'll just take a look at a couple of really obvious verses here and again, we need a different perspective, and Scripture gives it to us. Psalm 119 beginning in verse 67, Psalm 119 verse 67 and verse 71. The psalmist says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word." The affliction, the suffering that he had was a gift from God because it led him into a more narrow path of obedience. He learned things spiritually. He grew in his heart and in his character in a way that would not have happened apart from that affliction so that in verse 71 he could say, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." He says, "It was good for me that I was afflicted. I'm glad I went through that suffering because on the other side I see that God had spiritual purposes and he was teaching my heart things about himself, things about spiritual life that I would not have learned in any other context."

Let's look at the book of Romans in the New Testament, again, not taking the time to expound these things in any detail at all, simply to highlight how often, how often Scripture speaks to this issue. In Romans 5, Romans 5, we read this, beginning in verse 1, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Look at that, those initial two verses, we're in a status of peace with God, we stand by faith, we're in grace, we rejoice, hope, glory, so many good things Paul is speaking about here in this chapter, and then he builds on it and goes further in verse 3 when he says, "more than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." There's a connected chain of blessing, one link leading to another, connecting to another, connecting to another, sufferings leading to joy because suffering produces things in us that would not happen in any other way, endurance, better character, which

produces hope and leads us into an experiential knowledge of the love of God mediated to us by the Holy Spirit.

Now who wouldn't want that? Who wouldn't want that who is a spiritually-minded person. Yes, a carnally-minded and earthbound person concerned only with the things of this world might discount and disregard and disdain such spiritual things but as Christians, you know, we want to grow. We want to know our Lord. We want to be found pleasing in his sight. And if setting aside the pain and the suffering, if we have those desires for those spiritual goals, we would recognize that whatever the agent is that advances those in our lives, it's our friend. It helps us. And what if, just what if, in light of those things, what if suffering was a gift to produce good things in our heart?

Well, let's pause as we're turning through the rest of the New Testament. Let's pause for a moment at 2 Corinthians 1. 2 Corinthians 1 and as you're turning there, I find it helpful and encouraging to see how often Scripture addresses the matter of affliction in the life of a believer. That tells me that it's to be expected. It tells me that God does not despise the difficulties that we have with our affliction, and it shows that God has prepared the way to help us for our afflictions. So in 2 Corinthians 1 verse 3, we read this, "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. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too."

And so the suffering, again, it opens the door to a greater intimacy with God and not only that, if we could abandon our self-centered thinking and approach to life for just a little bit, we could realize that as we suffer, God is preparing us to be effective in ministry to others in a future point in our lives. You can't see that at the time. You can't plan it. You can't know what form that might take. But God sends us affliction in part to prepare us that we would receive his comfort and then, again, links in a chain connected together, we suffer, God comforts us with the purpose that we would be effective in being a minister to someone else in their suffering, whatever their suffering might be. You know, the effective, isn't it true, those of you that have been around life for any length of time, isn't there something particularly special and effective when you're getting encouragement from someone that you know has suffered deeply in their lives? Say, "Okay, this is real, and this person's not talking down to me. This person has been there. God has helped them. Maybe there's something for me in what this person is saying. Maybe there's something to it." Well, if we're in a position to minister effectively to other believers, and we've been prepared, what prepares us for that is suffering, then what if suffering was a gift to make us more effective in the lives of the people around us? You see, beloved, let me just stop here for just a moment. If we selfishly buck against suffering just because we want to live a comfortable life, look at all of the purposes of God that we are resisting in the process. You don't want to be like that, do you? Don't you want to see the purposes of God advanced in your life? Well, what if he's doing so through the suffering that he sends to you? That's 2 Corinthians 1.

Then just a couple of others just very quickly in the book of James 1. I always feel like when I'm talking to someone in suffering, I have to handle James 1 with particular care and not be perceived as speaking down to someone or dismissing their difficulty because that's never my heart in anything like that. But Scripture itself says in James 1, verse 2, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." This sounds just like Romans 5, doesn't it? Endurance produces character. Verse 4, "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." The suffering somehow is a vehicle that is being used to deliver the blessing of God to you and while the suffering is uncomfortable, the knowledge that blessing is attendant to it, is attached to it, is a cause for joy that lets you look beyond the circumstances to rejoice in the purposes of God, the God who designed your affliction, especially for you.

Now one more in 1 Peter 1. Boy, you could read the whole chapter, but let's limit it to verse 3 through 7. Peter says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." You see, he's praising God and he says, God has caused us to be born again. He's shown us great mercy in forgiving our sins and giving us the promise of eternal life. We're certainly going to enter into our inheritance. His power is guarding us while we wait for what comes in the last time. Look at the full panoply of the blessing of God given to you in Christ, he says. Now in verse 6, "In this," in this salvation that I was just talking about in the prior four verses, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Peter says, yes, you may be suffering now. It's just for a little while. It's only if it's necessary. And grieved by various trials, but again, there's an outcome, there's an outcome that God is working out. After the trial is over, the genuineness of your faith will be certified as if by a metallurgist certifying the quality of a gem that's in front of him. Your test will be shown real by the fact that God enabled you to persevere through the severity of the trial and come out safe praising him on the other side.

Well, that's not something that's valued by the world, but we're talking to Christians, and Christians want to please the Lord. We want to know that our faith is real. We want to stand like men in the midst of it and so, beloved, again I come to this point. I said, you know, our problem is we want out when maybe the Lord wants us in. If you could have your way when you're superficially, emotionally reacting in prayer, "God, take this away from me," you might be wanting to chase off the very thing that would be the source of the greatest blessing that God would give to you. What if that suffering is a gift, my friend? What if that suffering is a gift?

I remember, I've mentioned this a time or two, when I was a very young Christian, a very long time ago, I remember hearing a speaker say something that I don't know that I would

necessarily say it this way, but it stuck with me, it's helpful. You know, in the early trials of my Christian life, he said something that stuck with me. He said, the thing that you would most have God take away from you is the thing you most want to keep because it is what he will use to bring you closer to himself, and as I look back over the course of my life, say, you know what, that principle's proven to be pretty true. Things that I would not want, things I wouldn't wish on anyone, God actually used those in great ways and accomplished things that I wouldn't have known anything about in any other way. And so we need to realize that sometimes we want out when the Lord wants us in because he is producing so much good through the trials that he sends to us.

Let's go to a third point, kind of broaden it back out, and to address friends that maybe are self-consciously not Christians, you know, but now they're facing difficult trials. There's news in the Indiana media about a former NBA player facing a life-threatening problem with his physical heart. Sadly, from the things that you read, I don't know where he's at spiritually, but he's 48, he was an NBA player, he's a model of strength and athletic ability, but now his heart is failing and he needs a transplant and at seven foot and 250 pounds he may not get one, and the stories being reported are just so poignant about, you know, he said, "I'm scared." And, you know, he's got kids and all of that, and it's for folks like that that I would say these things with great sympathy, with great desire to help them with what the word of God would have to say to address them and to help them at whatever stage the suffering may come, and we're framing this in the terms of physical illness again.

Now, with all of that said, it pains me as a pastor to just see people so afraid, legitimately afraid of a legitimate threat, and there's just this sense that, "I don't know what to do with this. I want out, but I don't know what to do with this, and I can't get out. And it wasn't that long ago I was running up and down the court with the best athletes in the world." Well, point number three, and again, this gets harder before it gets better, but what I would say to those that are facing terminal illness or very uncertain futures because of their physical frame, thirdly, God calls you to think about death. God calls you to think about death. Now, I'm not assuming the worst about your physical future. I'm not wishing a fatal outcome to what you're facing. I would encourage you to pray to God and to seek him. I encourage you to seek physical care for your body but let's say that you could be cured instantly. What then? Say that you got immediate healing. What then? Well, don't just stop there. Think through it all the way to the end. This is what people are so unwilling to do. You have to think through it all the way to the end and what comes at the end? Sooner or later, my friend, I say it sympathetically and I say it for the help of your soul, sooner or later you will still face death eventually. You're going to face death whether you face it now as a result of your existing affliction or whether it's a future affliction and you make your way through this one.

And look, I know that this is an unpleasant subject. It's even frightening for many. We don't want to leave our loved ones. We don't know what happens after death. We don't know, most of us, many of us have no idea what the dying process is like and is it going to be dark? Is it going to be fearful? Is it going to be painful? And having seen people on their deathbeds, I'm so sympathetic to that. And the challenge, the challenge that people

who do not have a living faith in Christ, the challenge is this, you're tempted to, because it's so unpleasant, so unknown, what happens to me after I die? Is there a me after I die? All of these profound questions that are legitimate and need to be answered, in which there are answers for all of these questions, but when we don't know the answers, and when we're in the middle and the grip of fear, you know, we're tempted to ignore death, to not think about it, to push it away, to joke our way around it. I remember seeing an interview of, some of you may remember the actor Michael Landon, who was in a number of very popular television series, and he developed some kind of cancer, pancreatic or liver cancer, something like that at a very young age, he was in his 50s, as I recall, and everybody knew that he was dying. everybody knew that he was dying. He was on an interview, I believe, with Johnny Carson on "The Tonight Show," and he put up this bravado which, again, in one sense I'm sympathetic with, he didn't want to appear weak, but the interview was so sad from a Christian perspective because he was so worldly and even almost profane in the things that he was saying and in the jokes that he was making, and it was obvious that there was this great incongruity between a man who was on the brink of eternity and about to lose his life at a very young age, comparatively speaking, and yet making no acknowledgment and being obviously unprepared for that certain event that was just around the corner for him.

I think that's tragic. I think that's tragic and we have real souls that are going to live on after we die, and Scripture says that the wise man will consider death. He won't avoid it. In fact, the Scripture encourages us to go to funerals, to go to places where people are sick and dying. In Ecclesiastes 7:2, it says, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart." That's Ecclesiastes 7:2, and any pastor worth his salt who ever does a funeral, takes advantage of that opportunity and gently tries to press upon people, "You know, one day this will be our fate as well. We need to think about this. What will happen to you when you die?" It awakens us to things that we might otherwise avoid and here's my point that perhaps I'm laboring to make in the middle of the moment here, what if suffering, what if your illness is a gift that causes you to think about things that you would otherwise avoid? Your illness, my friend, it is a gift. It is a gift to you, even if it is terminal. If you're not a Christian, illness is a gift because it brings death to the forefront of your thinking.

Think about it like this, illness, serious illness is like a warning gate at train tracks. You are approaching the intersection with the railroad track. You think that everything is safe. You don't see anything to the right or to the left, and yet all of a sudden the bells start ringing, the lights start flashing, and the gate comes down. What's it doing for you? What is it giving to you? It's warning you that there is a danger that you may not perceive. You think that you are safe, but the warning gate alerts you to an unrecognized risk to your well-being. You say, "Oh, I need to do something about this because the gate is down. I've been warned about imminent danger." And my friend, my friend, that danger threatens the apparent well-being of the moment. It threatens the apparent well-being of the moment and so if you've gone through life and things have gone reasonably well for you, you've had a measure of prosperity, a measure of success, you know, relationships come and go, whatever, but you kind of feel like you're doing well, you know, and I say



this with such great profound sympathy for that guy that I was reading about the past couple of days. You know, you had a basketball career that was the envy of millions. Now all of a sudden, now all of a sudden, well-being is gone. Rightly considered, rightly considered, that affliction reminds you that death is coming. The Bible says it's appointed that every man will die, and after this comes judgment. Other earthly commentators say sometimes death is undefeated. It's appointed that we will die and it is to our benefit if we consider that now and take it into account and deal with the reality and deal with the reality while we can before it's too late because, beloved, one day your present well-being will one day change and if there is something that comes into your life that alerts you to that danger, that sets off the bells and warning lights and says something's coming that you're not ready for, what if that's a gift? What if that's a blessing in the long-term eternal perspective?

That leads us naturally into the fourth point, and it's still getting harder before it gets better. And look, one of the things that I would say about this is, I don't believe that anyone, especially a pastor, does anyone any favors by trying to cover up these things or not talking about them explicitly. That doesn't do anybody any good. You know, can you imagine just using the train track analogy and a real danger is barreling down the tracks that the driver doesn't see. Let's pretend he doesn't understand the significance of a warning gate, for example. Let's just pretend something ridiculous like that. Can you imagine the driver, the naive driver sitting in the driver's seat and you're a passenger and you look at him and say, "Eh, it's probably nothing, it'll all be okay, go on ahead." Boom! That would be criminal irresponsibility, wouldn't it? Well, in an even greater way when we have the opportunity to open Scripture to people that are suffering and in real genuine adversity and don't know what to do, I'm not doing anybody any favors if I hide and suppress this fourth point that God calls you to think about judgment. This is hard but as an ordained minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I have a responsibility to be faithful to anyone that comes under the sound of my voice on this.

Death is not the end. You have a soul that will live on after you die and, beloved, then what? Then what? What's going to happen to you? What's going to happen to the real you, your soul, as it lives on after you die? What's going to happen to you? Well, the Bible doesn't leave any question about it. It speaks plainly. It says we will stand, we will all stand before God and give an account for our lives. As I said earlier, Hebrews 9 says it's appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment. And beloved, that's a problem. That is a problem for every man, woman, boy, and girl, because God sees us differently than we see ourselves. We tend to think that we're good enough to go to heaven if we even think that there is a heaven. We certainly don't think that we're bad enough to go to hell if there is such a hell. And people reason like this, "I'm not perfect, but the good outweighs the bad. I did right by my fellow man. I think God will let me in. You know, surely he weighs these things on a scale. He grades on a curve. I wasn't a Hitler. I wasn't a mass murderer or anything." That's entirely the wrong way to think about these things, and it's not how God sees it at all. The question that God asks is, "Did you love me with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind during the life that I gave you on earth? Did you pay attention to the gospel of Jesus Christ when it was given to you? Did you love Christ? Did you serve him with your life? Did you keep my law with

perfection because perfection is the standard, 'You shall be holy as I myself am holy.'" When you understand what the standard is, you realize there's a train barreling down the track at me, a train of judgment.

The Bible says in Romans 3, "There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together they have become useless. There is none who does good. There is not even one." Your affliction is awakening you to the reality of your spiritual condition. That's why God sends it to you, particularly if a message like this falls into your hands. Here you have your affliction, and here you have from the word of God something given to you to explain it and help you interpret it rightly so that you can be prepared for that inevitable moment of death when it comes. And it's not that God saves everyone. It's not that everyone goes to heaven. That's not the message of Scripture at all, my friend. The Bible says in 2 Thessalonians 1 that those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus will pay the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power. Now, that's a problem. You don't have time to make it right. You don't have time to fix it. In fact, you couldn't fix it if you wanted to. If you've broken the law and the guilt is upon you, you can't erase it by going to church or making a bequest to a church. There's no works you can do. You have guilt in your soul that must be dealt with, and you can't be good enough to turn it around and earn the favor of God. Even if you tried, the Bible says all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment to God.

I can picture somebody maybe seeing the video after the fact saying, "You're supposed to be, you're a pastor, you're supposed to be my friend and what you're telling me in the midst of my very real affliction, you're suggesting maybe it's a gift to me when this is probably going to separate me from my wife and kids before my time. That's ridiculous. Then you tell me to think about death. That's the last thing I want to think about. Then you tell me judgment's coming. Then you tell me I'm not fit to pass through the judgment. What kind of friend are you?" Well, I guess my defense would be is that the best friend is the one that tells you the most truth and we're dealing in matters of truth, my friend, in this time. God sends illness to you so that you will think about death and judgment.

Let's have a simple illustration here, shall we? We all travel to one extent or another. Some people travel to other parts of the world. Some people just travel in the neighborhood and go to the grocery store. But whenever you travel someplace, whenever you travel to another city, you say you don't think necessarily in all of these explicit terms, but this is what you're conditioned to do in your mind. You say, "That's where I'm going, and now I need to plan how I'm going to get there. I gotta take a right on Elm Street. I gotta turn left at West Virginia and go on up north to Pennsylvania." Whenever you travel, you plan ahead so that you know how to get to the destination and even more, you know how to arrive at the destination. There's a destination that you're going to, and we all know to plan for it, to have an idea of how we're going to get there and what we're going to do when we arrive.

Well, beloved, this is the gift that illness, your affliction, provides for you if you haven't thought about death and taken it seriously. Illness makes you think about death and what

it should do, what God would produce in your heart in the process, is that you do this, you think ahead to what that ultimate final destination is. "My final destination on earth is going to be death. Whether I like that or not is irrelevant to the equation." You think ahead to death, you think ahead to what death introduces you to, which is judgment, and that's the ultimate final destination. What's going to happen then? At that point, you have a great opportunity, a great gift has been given to you, a gift to take into account now what is certain to happen then. You have a window of time, it may be brief, to address what's going to happen to you at death and judgment that you might otherwise have ignored and if you just died suddenly, you didn't even have the opportunity to think about it. Take death and judgment into account now while there's time. What if your suffering was a gift from God to enable you to think about eternal things while there was still time to find grace? What if?

Well, now I can give you the good news. Finally, there's good news. You had to know there was good news coming. A great offer made to you right in these moments because point number five, God calls you to come to Christ. God calls you to come to Christ. And we've covered a lot of ground in this short message. We've said that, first of all, God designed your illness for you, number one. Number two, we talked to Christians for a moment and said, you know, sometimes we want out when God wants us in. We came back to talk more broadly, more generally, and this is true for Christians and non-Christians alike, God calls you to think about death. It's better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting so that you would take it to heart. Fourthly, we said God calls you to think about judgment, the fact that there is a judgment and no human being on his own anywhere in the course of time is ready to face that judgment by himself. There is a holy God and a sinful you and there is a gap between the two of you. You need a mediator. You need someone who loves you enough that he can put his hand on your shoulder and yet knows God, is so connected to God that he can, so to speak, put his hand on God and bring the two of you together in reconciliation while there's still time. Is there someone like that? The Bible says that there is. God calls you to come to Christ and, my friend, the good news is that God has provided a way for someone just like you to pass through death unafraid, to go into judgment and to be acquitted of all of your sins. Nay, even more, to be accepted by a holy God as righteous in his sight. There is a way for you. There is a way forward that takes all the fear out of death, that takes all of the uncertainty and swallows it up in a certain victory that is offered to you without cost, without payment, available for full appropriation right now where you are in the moment. It's a gift that God offers to you right now.

What kind of gift would that be? A gift where you could know with certainty that you are going to heaven and that it will be well with your soul when you die? No matter what you leave behind, there will be a great and glorious and forgiven and certain future ahead for you where you will be well in the end and it will be well with your soul? Wouldn't you want something like that in your terminal illness? Isn't it time for your ears to perk up and to pay heed? To say, "The warning gates have come down to protect me now. How do I get through safely to the other side?" What the Bible tells us is that that same God who designed your illness for you sent his only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to save helpless, desperate sinners just like you. Just like you. Without any preconditions, without you

having to fix yourself up, God invites you to come as you are to the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal salvation. Jesus said, "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

You've heard about Jesus probably in some manner or form, maybe never read the Bible. It's time to now. Turn to the gospel of John and read that for yourself. But just in summary form, Christ came into the world on a mission to save sinners just like you, to deal with their problem of guilt and to give them a gift of righteousness which God would accept in place of anything you could do so that he could accept you and welcome you into his family. The Bible says that Christ died once for sins when he died on the cross. When Jesus went to the cross, he was paying the penalty for sinners just like you. He suffered in the place of sinners just like you and God punished Christ for sins that others had committed, Christ having committed none of his own. God punished Christ as he stood in their place. Christ died, he was buried, and he was raised again indicating that the price for sin had been paid. Death had been conquered as Christ came out of that grave having conquered death and death no longer has any hold or claim on him. And the invitation, the offer of the gospel of Jesus Christ is, is that this is offered to you. The same victory over sin, the same victory over death is offered to you right now as a gift that you can have immediately as your immediate possession.

The resurrection shows that Jesus Christ defeated death in judgment. The Bible says he made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf so that we might become the righteousness of God in him, and that is the answer to guilt. That's the answer to death. Christ paid the price. Christ entered death, came out on the other side, and now calls you in your weakness to repent of your sins, to embrace him by a complete surrender of faith to him, and to entrust your eternal soul, which you have, which will live on after you die, Scripture calls you to give that soul to Christ and ask him to keep it in his safekeeping and to bring you safely into heaven. Oh, what a privilege it is for someone like me to give good news like that to you in your sorrow.

Romans 6:23, it says, "The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." And my scared, frightened, suffering friend, the Lord Jesus Christ says words like this to you. He said them when he lived on earth 2,000 years ago. He says them with the same power, the same authority, the same entreaty, the same invitation, the same desire for your well-being. He offers it all freely to you, to make it yours and to know that he sees you in your suffering, sees you in your weakness, sees you in your danger, and promises you full and complete deliverance.

Listen to what it says in Matthew 11:28 to 30. Frightened by your suffering, frightened by the terminal illness, discouraged under the weight of adversity, Jesus has it covered. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Is that the first time you've heard these words? Imagine you wouldn't have listened to them but for the suffering that you're in. Imagine that an offer to your eternal benefit, your eternal blessing freely presented to you and on the authority of the trustworthy Lord Jesus Christ, you're

invited to come to him and receive the fullness of every benefit that he offers to those who would come to him. My friend, you can turn to Christ and find an answer for your suffering. You can turn to Christ and find an answer for death. You can turn to Christ and find an answer for judgment. Oh, my friend, come to Christ. Come to Christ. Come to Christ not to be saved from illness, not to be saved from adversity but to be saved from sin, to be saved from judgment, to be saved from hell and damnation, and to be given the gift of eternal life.

If you're suffering, we answer our question now, what if suffering was a gift? What if your suffering led you to Christ? You will spend all of eternity giving thanks to God if it does that that suffering became the source of the invitation that he brings to you through his word to come to Christ and be saved.

Let's pray together.

*Our gracious Lord, we know that there is so much adversity, so much sorrow in this cursed world. Thank you for your sympathy for sinners. Thank you for the love and grace that you extend in a free and generous offer of forgiveness and eternal life for all those that would come to Christ. May you take these feeble, meager words that have been said here this evening and bring them with great power to the hearts of those that hear. May you send this forth and, Father, find those who would benefit, whose hearts you have received, and lead them out of the sorrow, the fear, into the safety and security that belong to those who have received Jesus Christ by faith alone. Have mercy on them. Have mercy on this dear man named Scott waiting for a heart transplant, his story known all over the Midwest now. Father, we pray for him in a special way, but not only him, but all those who suffer, all those that are afflicted. Father, may the grace and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ rest and abide upon each one that would ever be under the sound of my voice in this message. Thank you for your grace. Thank you that you work all things after the counsel of your will. Help us all to find our rest in thee. In Jesus' name, amen.*

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