

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 6: Fighting for Faith (Part 1)**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

***Struggling for faith in God’s sovereignty and goodness***

**Introduction**

**Romans 10:17 says, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”**

“**Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”** That’s really the only thing I have to communicate this morning. **Romans 10:17**. It’s at the top of our website, our bulletins, our directory, your handout—pretty much every piece of paper that comes out of our church. **“Faith comes by hearing.”**

The flame of the Christian life is not one-size-fits-all. Some of us right now are filled with a flame of faith that is bright and hot and strong. Others of us believe but are digging around desperately looking for any sign of a warm coal. If your faith is strong right now you need what we are going to talk about today just as much as someone whose tears may be quenching what may seem like the dying embers of their faith. As believers and students of God’s word we know a time will come, if not now, that you’ll feel your need more acutely.

Every spark of faith is a miracle of the Spirit of God—but it’s not like other miracles because God has told us the normal way he works this miracle: through his Word.

Suffering is a battle for faith. The core question is often, “In this seemingly hopeless situation is God still good, is he still good to me or do I need to take things into my own hands?” *Is* God good?... How do you answer “yes” all the time?

More than relief, more than comfort, more than security…we need faith. And so, we must realize that this faith is not the work of a week or two; it is the work of a lifetime. It is the work of your lifetime. This lesson is oriented to the individual… Your faith… Next week we are going to talk about how we can support others in their trials—in essence how the faith of someone else can encourage us. But just as we know that the faith of someone else can’t save us, we have to conclude that someone else’s faith also won’t ultimately sustain us. We, each, need to be rooted and grounded in the truth.

Now, additionally, today’s class has the potential to be the source of both great insight and disappointment. It’s disappointing because what I have to say can sound unremarkable. You’re struggling through the worst crisis of your life and you come to me and ask, “What help can you give me?” And I say, “You need the word of Christ.” Really?

And yet I hope this class is insightful because of that very simplicity. All suffering is a battle for faith. But faith is a miracle. So, what hope do we have in these times of suffering that a miracle will happen?

Let’s think a little deeper on **Rom 10:17** to establish a solid foundation for our main points, **“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”**

Hearing. Is all hearing the same? Our experience would confirm not—I think we all know that we can hear and not understand…just like we can see and not perceive. Likewise then, it is one thing to hear but totally another to hear in a way that leads to faith.

So, we need to hear carefully. In **Luke 8:17-18**: Jesus says, **“For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not come to light. Take care then how you hear…”**

Hearing, understanding, and perceiving are all important. We are to **“take care.”** We can say, “I heard every word that was said” or “I read every word in the book” and remember very little. There is a difference between a more mechanical hearing and a hearing that leads to faith.

**Galations 3 verses 2 and 5** question, **“…Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith”, “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith…?”**

We need to consider and take heed, take care of, how we are hearing. There is a hearing that leads to faith and a hearing that doesn’t lead to faith. With this in mind I want to say this next point carefully—to say you’ve been a Christian and reading the bible and listening to sermons for 2, 10, 20 or 50 years doesn’t really tell me anything. What I really want to know is what you have heard! If after all those years you haven’t got faith… then you haven’t heard.

So, we understand this faith to be produced by hearing; but what is it we are to “hear”? As our verse in Romans points—faith comes through hearing the word of Christ.

In **Acts 16:11-15** we see the conversion of Lydia. We read in verse 14 that, **“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”** We can never get this kind of hearing that leads to faith, the hearing that causes us to pay attention, unless the Lord opens our heart and ears and eyes.

The faith that we fight for when suffering, that we need our heart opened to pay attention to, is always related to the message of Christ. Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ. It is the word of Christ, applied to the heart and mind by the Spirit that produces faith; no other word will produce this kind of faith, and this kind of faith is what will sustain us. Our life is found in looking to Christ, in hearing Christ, not in looking to our own faith.

**By faith all things are possible. But remember the power is not in the faith but in the God upon whom faith relies!** With knowledge of God, belief in what we read (what we “hear”) and trust in God to be and do what he says he will, we grow our faith—and this starts with hearing the word of God.

J.I. Packer explains, *“If I were the devil, one of my first aims would be to stop folk from digging into the Bible…I should do all I could to surround it with the spiritual equivalent of pits, thorn hedges, and man traps, to frighten people off.[[1]](#footnote-1)”* Distract us, get us busy, make us to think we’re *too* hurt to turn to God’s Word and the battle is already lost.

So, this morning we begin two weeks on the battle for faith. Next week, we’ll think of what it looks like to fight for faith together in the community of the local church; this week, as mentioned, our focus will be fighting for faith on your own. And to do that we’ll cover four categories of what we can do to fight for faith by ourselves in the midst of suffering and all are related to the word of God: **Read the Bible, Pray the Bible, Remember the Bible**, and **Sing the Bible**.

**I. Read the Bible**

If faith comes by hearing God’s word, then reading Scripture is obviously important. We want to read it and give our full attention to it—to take a page and say, “No matter what is in the page I believe it, whether it be the threatening or the promise, the proverb, the command, or the blessing…” But as Packer points out, there are all sorts of things that get in the way—and especially during times of difficulty. Let’s look at three things that keep us from reading—or reading well—and what we can do about them.

1. **Protect against rote duty**

One of the things that can really hamper our lives as Christians is when we read the Bible simply because we feel we ought to read the Bible. Now, don’t misunderstand me—self-discipline is a very necessary thing. I don’t always *feel* like reading the Bible, and I read it anyway. But *disciplined* is different from *rote*. Let’s say your dentist tells you to floss your teeth each night and you do—but half-heartedly. What happens? You still get the cavities. Because simply having “flossing” on your schedule doesn’t mean you’re getting anything out of it.

The greatest protection against Scripture reading as routine or superficial is a sense that we need it. True faith rests in a leaning upon Christ; remaining “in Him”. Consider passengers on a sinking ship. It is not the life jacket on board the ship that saves a man when he is drowning, or his belief that the life jacket is a great invention. No! The man must have it around his neck, or his hand on it, or else he may drown. So, suffering can actually help you understand how much you need God’s word. Do you see how that works?

God wants to build your faith. He will use your struggles to do that.

As you read and hear, through the Spirit, you will see the difference between your goals and God’s. Now, you *may* be able to accomplish all of *your* goals on your own. But they’re not really accomplishing anything that will last, are they? What about God’s goals? Can you accomplish them on your own? Absolutely not! The more you realize what lofty goals he has for you, the more you will feel the need to be rooted in *his* truth and in *his* reality. Which will lead to your feeling of desperation to get into the Word.

1. **Protect against busyness**

If you want to read the Bible well and regularly, you need a plan. Now, for some of us in this type-A city, that seems like a no brainer. For others, we cringe at the idea. *Why not just be free and let it happen?* But when life gets busy, we all succumb to the tyranny of the urgent and end up ditching what’s most important. A plan serves us well because it guards what is crucial and helps us to say “No” to the distractions of the moment.

*When?* Choose the time when you are at your best. Jesus met with his Father early in the morning **(Mark 1:35)**, and unless there’s some compelling reason to the contrary, that would seem to be a good model.

*Where?* Somewhere free of distractions.

*What?* In one sense, this doesn’t really matter. With a little knowledge of Scripture, you can open up anywhere and profit. But protect against playing “Bible Roulette”—read through the Bible as it was written, working your way through large chunks of Scripture. I find that reading the passage being preached the next week is a wonderful discipline: it prepares me for the sermon and takes the guess work out of what I should study. Or you might use a Bible reading plan like you see on your handout.

1. **Protect against exhaustion.**

I wonder if you’ve been exhausted in the Bible before. When you open it, it seems cold, stiff or unresponsive. Especially when we’re in times of suffering and we feel numb to the world, it can be really hard to engage with Scripture. How do we protect against this? First, pray (more in the next point). Before you read, pray that God would **“open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your law” (Psalm 119:18)**. Second, pray. Pray through the passage you’re studying, looking for things to praise God for, things to thank him for, things to pray for, things to confess. Third, pray. When you finish, pray that having listened to his Word, you would be changed. And fourth, read. Especially in times of difficulty, using something someone else has written as a guide to studying Scripture can be really helpful. Things like Don Carson’s daily devotions called “For the Love of God” or Keri Folmar’s workbook on Philippians or Jim Boice’s published sermons on Romans. When we’re feeling weak, a helping hand can be a wonderful help.

**II. Pray…and Pray the Bible**

In **Ephesians 1**, Paul prays **“that the *eyes of your heart may be enlightened* in order *that you may know* the hope to which he has called you.[[2]](#footnote-2)”** Why? Because as we’ve already discussed, “if God does not open our hearts to the word of God, we can read it a hundred hours a week and never see the glory of what it says and the one who gave it[[3]](#footnote-3).” So, we should not only read the Bible, we should *pray* the Bible – especially in the middle of a trial. Any time we are meditating on Scripture, it’s a good practice to consider what we’re reading and in response, pray. A helpful acronym to remember what to pray is ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Here’s how ACTS applies when we’re hurting:

***Adoration***

What do you see in the text that you can praise God for? This may seem like an odd thing to do when we’re hurting but having a big view of God is essential for facing big problems.

***Confession***

When we’re suffering, there is a promise in **James 4** that is precious: **“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (v. 8).** Isn’t that what we need when we’re suffering? So how do we “come near to God?” In James, the answer is repentance. He goes on to say, **“Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (v9-10).** Sometimes, the hardship we’re facing is God’s loving discipline to make us holy – so we do well to examine our hearts and align them with God’s. But even when our suffering is simply the result of living in a fallen world, we may be responding poorly. So, are you angry? Understand why and grieve over the sin at its root. Despondent? Same thing. In times of suffering, we may feel life is hard *enough* without staring at our sin. But if we are praying the Bible, we will pray passages like **James 4** that lead us to repentance.

***Thanksgiving***

When we’re suffering, thanksgiving is hard to come by. And yet it’s so important. Think of Paul’s words in **Philippians 4:6**, **“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”** Why thanksgiving? Because what we need is not just relief but trust. When we slow down and thank God for his goodness we can see, it helps us have faith in the goodness we can’t yet see.

***Supplication***

Supplication is another word for request. Whatever our suffering, we should always ask God for wisdom to respond well[[4]](#footnote-4), grace to obey, and relief from our suffering. God’s promise is to always give us what is good[[5]](#footnote-5).

And as encouragement to persist in prayer and praying Scripture consider a quote from Spurgeon [long quote]:

*“Dear friends, if your heart has been set upon any special object in prayer, if you have an express promise for it [in Scripture], you must not be staggered if the object of your desire be farther off now than when you first began to pray. If even after months of supplication the thing should seem more difficult now to attain than it ever was, wait at the mercy seat in the full persuasion that although God may take his time, and that time may not be your time, yet he must and will redeem his promise when the fullness of time has come. If you have prayed for the salvation of your child, or husband, or friend, and that person has grown worse instead of better, do not cease praying. If that dear little one has become more obstinate, and that husband even more profane, still God must be held to his word…do not let the fact that the answer seems farther off than ever be any discouragement to you. Remember that to trust God in the light is nothing, but to trust him in the dark—that is faith. It is nothing to rest upon God when providence agrees with God, but to believe God when providence is contrary to him—that is faith. To believe that all shall go well when outward providences blow softly is any fool’s play, but to believe that it must and shall be well when storms and tempests are all around you, and you are blown farther and farther from the harbor of your desire—this is a work of grace. By this you shall know whether you are a child of God or not, by seeing whether you can exercise faith in the power of prayer when all things forbid you to hope.”*

***Praying the Psalms***

In the Psalms, God has given us models for our prayers and we see real struggling and suffering worked out through prayer. As we pray with these great saints, our response can be both heartfelt and God-honoring. When you’re suffering, it’s tempting to gripe rather than to pray. So, praying through the Psalms is a great way to guide your prayer life.

How does this look? Let me give you a suggestion and you can make it an assignment this week:

* + 1. Choose a Psalm to pray through[[6]](#footnote-6).
    2. For at least 4 days out of the next week, set aside 15 minutes during your day (make sure to schedule it!). Read through the Psalm in its entirety, reflect/meditate on it, then spend time praying through each line of the Psalm.
    3. If you’re having trouble knowing how to pray through the Psalm, use the questions I’ve put in your handout[[7]](#footnote-7).

**III. Remember the Bible**

Have you ever noticed in the Bible how often we’re commanded to remember? In Deuteronomy, the people are commanded to *remember* lest they forget what God had done for them[[8]](#footnote-8). The church is given the Lord’s Supper to celebrate *in remembrance* of Jesus[[9]](#footnote-9). The apostle Peter writes, **“I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of *reminder*[[10]](#footnote-10).”** It’s not enough just to read the Bible, we need to remember what it says! So, four thoughts on remembering.

* + - 1. **Memorize God’s Word – Psalm 37:31** says, **“The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.”** Memorizing passages of Scripture is a great way to have it on your heart with you *wherever* you are[[11]](#footnote-11).
      2. **Take Command of Your Thoughts** – The writer in **Psalm 42** was under extreme duress. But in the Psalm we find him fighting for faith, fighting to hope in God. One of the things he does is preach to himself. In **v5**, he says, **“Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”** Who’s he talking to? His soul! Lloyd Jones in his book *Spiritual Depression* writes, **(Page 4 of HO)**

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them but they are talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday…Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man’s treatment [in Psalm 42] was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. “Why art thou cast down, O my soul?” he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says,: “Self, listen for moment, I will speak to you.” (*Spiritual Depression*, 20-21)

* + - 1. **Let Someone Listen**

We’ll touch on this again next week, but so often in difficult times, we *know* what to do already. We know where our hearts are believing lies about God. We know what thoughts we need to banish from our minds. We know we need time in God’s word. It’s just that we don’t want to. Sometimes the best thing to do is to talk with a friend who’s willing to listen. As we talk, we’ll find ourselves explaining to the other person what we need to do to have faith in God. And then we do it.

* + - 1. **Let Someone Talk**

Along those lines—don’t let that conversation be one-sided. One of the best things for your faith is to hear about someone else’s faith. Ask a friend who’s doing well what God is doing in her life right now. Ask what they’re seeing in their times in the word. Ask him how he’s encouraged in his faith. Latch on to the faith of those who can see more clearly than you can right now.

**IV. Sing the Bible**

How does singing awaken faith? Suffering well means not only submitting our will and our understanding to God’s purposes, it involves aligning our affections as well. Jonathan Edwards explains,

The duty of singing praises to God seems to be given wholly to excite and express religious affections. There is no other reason why we should express ourselves to God in verse rather than in prose and with music, except that these things have a tendency to move our affections.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We see this in the Psalms. Go back to **Psalm 42**. **“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.”** His plea for life is through song; and this is how God moves him from despair to hope.

Singing can help us remember the truth about God - which makes *what* we sing all the more important. So, when you’re singing for faith, make sure you’re singing *the Bible.* Practically, one thing you could do is to take your song sheet home from Sunday morning/evening, pick one song to sing throughout the week as part of your personal or family devotions. If you’re looking to download good music, there are a number of places online with Bible-saturated and God-honoring music (listed on handout[[13]](#footnote-13)). Talk to Christians who have suffered, and quite often it is the truth of Scripture captured in song that has proved most central to their struggle for faith.

**Conclusion**

OK—Look over your handout and you’ll see a kind of playbook for struggling for faith during suffering. “**Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ**.”

**We need faith, but remember the power is not in the faith, but in the God upon whom faith relies!** Faith is the work of God’s grace in us! And so, we *Read* the Bible – and have a plan to do so. *Pray* the Bible—praising, confessing, thanking, asking; even using the Psalms. *Remember* the Bible as you memorize, preach the gospel to yourself, and consider God’s faithfulness in the past. *Sing* the Bible, to align our affections with the truth about God.

This faith we need is not just the work of a week or two; it is the work of a lifetime. It is the work of our lifetime; and it is each one of our individual works of trust.

God uses the things we’ve talked about today to give us faith so we can wait patiently. Remember, suffering often moves slowly. So also, relief can come slowly. But, as the **Psalmist** says, **“none who wait for you shall be put to shame” (25:3).** I promise you, he has good in mind for every minute that goes by as you wait for his relief.

**Q & A**

1. Forward by J.I. Packer in *Knowing Scripture* by R.C. Sproul [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eph. 1:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/holding-fast-the-word-of-life-in-2010> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ja. 1:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matt. 7:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Could be any of the Psalms, but for example: Psalm 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 16, 19, 23, 25, 27, 40, 42-43, 55, 62, 63, 84, 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *What does this tell me about God; what does it reveal about him?*

   *If he is really like this, what difference does this particular truth make to how I live today?*

   *What wrong behavior, harmful emotions, false attitudes result in me when I forget he is like this?*

   *Does my life demonstrate that I am remembering and acting out of this?* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Deut. 4:9, 15-16, 19, 23, 39; 8:2, 11, 14, 18-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1 Cor. 11:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 2 Pet. 1:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Piper writes, “My own conviction is that a hundred – I dare say a thousand – problems will be solved in your life by memorizing Scripture…*before* the problem ever comes.” *When I Don’t Desire God* pg. 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in *Worship Matters* by Bob Kauflin, pg. 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Keith and Kristyn Getty (<http://www.gettymusic.com/>); Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) <http://www.igracemusic.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)