Clinging Cross, Coins, and Comfort: Small Group Action Plan at Burke Community Church

Nace Lanier
dminfacultyassistant@fuller.edu

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SMALL GROUP ACTION PLAN AT BURKE COMMUNITY CHURCH

Written by

NACE LANIER

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

NACE LANIER
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ABSTRACT

Clinging Cross, Coins, and Comfort: Small Group Action Plan at Burke Community Church
Nace Lanier
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2018

The purpose of this doctoral project is to design a small group action plan that equips the attendees at Burke Community Church in their walk with God as they journey or go with group members through pain and suffering. Small groups are the main place of fellowship and connection. It is the most intimate place for a person in the church to receive care. The church has been in existence for forty years and has recently experienced high growth in attendance.

The project is centered on devotional reflections featuring physical objects to remind the group members of the pain that a person in the group was experiencing. Once a need arose within a group, the person struggling received a clinging cross and the rest of the group received a coin. The group read and reflected on a forty-day devotional that lead them into a deeper understanding of the work and presence of God in pain and suffering. The physical objects were carried to remind them of their commitment to God and each other through the trial.

The leadership of the small groups and the group themselves will reflect theologically on pain and suffering. The groups will focus on the crucifixion as a framework for coping in difficulties of life. The expectation of blessing in the midst of spiritual warfare will be meditated upon to gain a better perspective. Pain and suffering are a foundation by which the church was built and must continue to grow. God is not absent from trials but most present even when silent.

The project is not meant to be a solution or remedy for someone to overcome a problem. The project is giving the group reorientation about the expectation of the children of God who are called to follow a crucified Savior.

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PART ONE

MINISTRY CHALLENGE AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

Pain is a common thread woven throughout the history of the world. Suffering touches every soul on earth, yet the Church is consistently confounded by its existence. A clear and nuanced vision of the work of God through pain and suffering is essential for the body of Christ to be the agent of life it was created to be.

The Church understands that sin is the root of all ailments. There is the belief that Jesus is the solution, but the Church struggles to lead people well into a relationship with Him while struggling with pain and suffering. This project will be implemented at Burke Community Church to address the theological issues and give tangible help to guide the congregation to love each other.

The purpose of this project is to design a small group action plan that equips the attendees at Burke Community Church in their walk with God as they or their group members go through pain and suffering. Burke, Virginia is a successful and financially-secure neighborhood where most inhabitants are intelligent college graduates with an expectation that the next generation will be just as successful as themselves. Burke Community Church contains a network of small groups that represent the adults who attend. The church has been in existence for forty years and has recently experienced a high growth in attendance. The small groups are a part of the growth vision of the church. Small groups are the main place for members and attendees to find fellowship and connection. The small group is the most intimate setting for a person in the church to receive care.
The support and care of small group leaders and participants form a significant and important role for the local church. Loving one another within a church body is not the sole responsibility of the leadership of the church. Pastoral care by paid or unpaid church leadership plays an important part in the loving mission of the church body. But their time and efforts are limited due to their relatively small numbers. Whether a small church of forty people or a large church of two thousand, the leaders represent a smaller portion than the congregation. Therefore, it is essential that church leadership equip the congregation in loving people through pain and suffering. Small groups and their leaders play an essential part in caring for each other in more intimate and longer terms.

Small group leaders and members will reflect theologically on pain and suffering. The groups will focus on the crucifixion of Jesus to place the difficulties of life in the proper framework. The group will meditate on the expectation of blessing in the midst of spiritual warfare that cost the Son of God His life by torture to gain a better perspective of life. Pain and suffering are foundation stones on which the Church was built and must continue to grow. God is not absent from trials but is quite present even when silent. The community of believers will be the most effective place of redemption and transformation when it can bring life from the midst of the darkest nights.

This project will center on devotional reflections and physical objects to focus the groups on pain that a person within the group is currently suffering. Once a need arises within a group, the person struggling will receive a palm-sized, hand-carved wooden cross and the rest of the group will receive a large coin. The collective group will read and reflect on a forty day devotional that will lead them into a deeper understanding of the work and presence of God in pain and suffering. The physical objects will be carried
to remind them of their commitment to God and to each other through the trial. The groups of Burke Community Church will be evaluated before any particular issue arises and after the time of the forty days project.

The project is not meant to be a solution or remedy for someone to overcome a problem. The project is for giving the group reorientation about the expectation of the children of God who are called to follow a crucified Savior. Each person will keep a reminder, either a cross or a coin, to help him or her focus on the reality of God in the midst of life, especially suffering.

The community of believers has a difficult time in knowing how to address great pain and personal suffering. People are uncomfortable with nothing to say and this places true community in peril. The Church’s silence becomes deafening instead of comforting. Words need not be spoken, but the community still must gather around the wounded. The community feels weak and powerless, but the truth is where people are weak there is power.

One of the goals of this project is to equip not only group leaders, but also all members of the group in caring for hurting members. There is power in words that can harm or heal. But when a person does not have a word, then expressing that fact is more than sufficient. Admitting that one does not know the right thing to say can be the truth that echoes deeply and brings forth an affection that is deeply needed. This project does not aim to give a list of answers or retorts to the deep mysteries of pain and suffering. It is to equip the Church body to know that often, it is good not to have the answers but hold on to truth.
Inspiring the small group to pray is an essential part of the project. The topic of the prayers of the group will depend on the specific situation. The love of the Church demands we intercede for others and seek the guidance of the Almighty. Pain-filled circumstances will be a part of a church community. Commitment to pray with and through a given situation plays an important part of healing and unity. When a situation is shared, the groups at Burke Community Church will have a time to commit to praying for the person. The length can vary as they feel led. The commitment to pray will be encouraged by a coin they will carry. The group commits to pray for the situation and person every time they touch the coin. The coin should be carried in their pocket for the time period they commit to praying. Therefore, instead of just a commitment to pray whenever the group gets together, the group prays individually at least twice a day. A group member should pray when he or she put the coin in their pocket and then when they would pull it out in the end of the day.

In a time of pain, confusion clouds the vision of others and the person suffering. This project creates a pathway so that the person going through struggles can know that someone is praying for him or her throughout each day. The hurting person is never alone and knows that at any time someone who cares for him or her is lifting him or her up to the Father. The person can picture a friend grabbing their keys before getting to their car and remembering to pray. The hurting person can imagine a group member getting ready for the day and praying before beginning a commute. The small group might never fully know how God will answer the prayers, but they can know that the prayers will at least be an encouragement to the person going through pain and a reminder of loving others throughout the day.
The project is designed to allow people to share their pains. While living in suffering, people often isolate themselves to buffer future possible pain. Walls are built around weakness in hope to contain the strength needed to survive the current crisis. The person in pain knows what well-meaning people might say and the possibility of more pain is often too much to risk. But instead of keeping pain away, people in isolation seal themselves off from the church, which should be a primary source of comfort and help. This project allows a small group to know what will happen when tough times come and are shared by group members. Fear of the unknown is replaced by a plan of care. By giving the small group tangible actions and objects, group members will be more engaged in situations they normally would not find themselves.

The person in the group that is sharing the hurt will receive a wooden cross that is slightly curved which fits in the palm of the hand. The cross of Christ is the central message of hope to the world. When someone loses a loved one to illness, her own future hopes become out of focus. A person can get lost in the void, therefore the physical cross is a place to turn and something to hold. Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, knows the devastation of a destroyed vision. On the cross, He was left alone. He was cast aside. He was abused. He was powerless. God is powerfully present at the moments when His people feel and experience what He felt.

Holding on to the cross helps the person to confess the frustration, anger, and malice that a fallen world causes. Holding on to the cross helps the member mourn the injustices, disenfranchisements, and blatant evil God allows to continue. The cross helps remind members that these horrors are the same things that He allowed to consume His one and only Son. Therefore, by clinging onto a physical cross, the small group member
remembers that Jesus is present in the midst of anger or physical struggles. Jesus is especially present when people expect Him to be distant. The project will encourage the hurting to turn towards the God who cares so much that He died for all on the cross.

The Bible is the bedrock of the Christian faith. The Church has not done a good job of teaching or equipping its people to learn from its wisdom. During a time of crisis, people open the Bible for help. But the difficulty of life does not create a great space for study. The hurting person may be more ready to hear and apply God’s Word but does not know where to turn in that big book.

The devotionals written for this project take the readers through forty pieces of important Scripture in forty days. The devotionals are written for consumption in bite-sized pieces. They are to be read over an extended period of time. The pains of life often come about suddenly, but the effects linger. The initial issue is a frightening time that brings the most attention. The devotionals give truth to sustain, not only for the beginning, but for the long haul. They are a part of building a vision of the activity of God in difficult situations that have long lasting effects.

Keeping the word of God in the hearts and minds of the group is essential to giving strength for the journey. The heroes of biblical stories are broken and hurting people. The greatest man and hero died on a cross. The devotionals are not rosy, feel-good proverbial nuggets about God taking away the struggles of the world. The reflections find the hope of God through the difficulties of life.

The project is about taking what the enemy would use to destroy and instead help build a vision to see how God is redeeming it for good. In a human perspective, God often allows too much destruction. God can and does use all things. It is difficult and
many times impossible to see how He can make good out of something so horrible. He uses a community encouraging, praying, and focusing on Him to give His Church a larger perspective on His character and activity.

My interest in this project is born out of my own struggles with pain and suffering. April 19, 2015 will forever weigh heavy on my heart. It is the day I took my oldest son to Children’s Medical Hospital to learn that he had a brain tumor. Fifteen months later on May 19, 2016, my son died. Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma (DIPG) choked the very life out of my ten year old boy. It is an inoperable tumor than grows interwoven within the brainstem. There is no cure. There is no preferred treatment. The ideas and theories of pain were never more crystalized than through loving all my children as we watched the cancer attack his motor skills until it finally shut down his heart. The care that I had sought to bring others through truth, prayers, and presence continues to guide me through the shadow.

God allowed my son to suffer and die. He could have healed him. The redeeming story could have been the power of God conquering what the best of modern day medicine is helpless to save. But He did not. My son Josiah is now whole. He has no more struggles or pain. He cries no more and is “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).¹ The rest of my family continues to struggle. Many of these pages are written with tears in my eyes. I pray that we all are able to live worthily the days and nights my son will never share. Josiah’s journey here is done. I thank God he lived it beautifully. I pray that the doctoral project will help others live it beautifully too.

¹ All Scripture quoted is from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.
Burke Community Church (BCC) reaches mainly into the Burke and Springfield, Virginia communities. The church also serves many throughout Fairfax County and surrounding counties due to the ease of access by highways. BCC also serves a large group that works for and with the US Department of Defense. Most senior level officers and retired military officers work at or for the Pentagon. Their children are normally in or entering high school. The area is known for its excellent secondary school systems. The perennially top school in the state, Thomas Jefferson, is a magnet school fed by the area. The four local high schools, West Springfield, Robinson, Woodson and Lake Braddock, are regularly ranked in the top fifteen in the state.¹ Therefore, the area is attractive to military families for its public education.

Burke, Virginia: A Bedroom Suburb of Washington, DC

BCC is located at the bottom of the Capital Beltway in northern Virginia. Interstate 495 encircles the Metropolitan Capital Region that includes Washington, DC, parts of Maryland and northern Virginia. The southernmost part of the circle is Springfield. The intersection is a web of roads that includes Interstate 395 and goes directly north into Washington, DC. The church is located at the intersection of Old Keene Mill Road, which connects Springfield and Burke, and Fairfax County Parkway. Both roadways are heavily trafficked as part of the Washington, DC commute.

The entire Capital District Region area is known for its horrible commute. Brian Martucci pulled information from the US census and a real-estate website to determine that Washington, DC had the worst commute in the nation. He writes that the average commute time for all commuters is 34.3 minutes, the average time that drivers spend in traffic is seventy-five hours per year, and the percent of commuters who drive is 76.1 percent. The area surrounding Burke Community Church has a bus line that runs nonstop to the Pentagon. There are two large park and ride commuter lots on the Old Keene Mill Road. The Virginia Railway Express has a stop in Burke five minutes from the church. The southernmost metro train access stop is in Springfield. Therefore, the area is highly desired for commuters.

Even with the horrible traffic, the area continues to thrive. The federal government is the main engine for the economic success of the area. Federal jobs offer a

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comfortable income that is reliable and steady. They provide an excellence pension plan that is not available in the private sector. Those that do not work directly for the government mostly work contracts for the federal government.

The residents of the area have higher degrees of education and a high standard of living. According to the US census of persons over twenty-five in Fairfax County, 91.6 percent have a high school degree, 30.9 percent have a bachelor’s degree, and 29 percent have a master’s degree.\(^4\) With such an educated demographic, it is not surprising to see a large parentage of people with a good income. The US census shows that the median household income in Fairfax County is $103,010, while the mean household income is $130,695. Nearly 30 percent of the population makes over $200,000.\(^5\) Therefore, the disciples at BCC and those in the surrounding area have the educational background to assimilate deeper study and the expendable income to invest from their resources to do so if they choose.

While they are spending a lot of time commuting, most are not struggling to pay the grocery bill. Noting the time restraints that commuting brings and economic income for the normal person in Fairfax County, the people of the church still have the ability to contemplate difficult theology with their high levels of education. It is important to communicate truth at an appropriate level for comprehension since church attendees’


degrees are normally not in theology. But they have proved their abilities to pursue learning to higher degrees.

**History of BCC**

Burke Community Church has been serving the area as a non-denominational church for forty-two years. It began from an adult Sunday school class of Kirkwood Presbyterian Church in Springfield. During the early 1970s, the Presbyterian denomination went through a lot of theological conflict. A new denomination called the Presbyterian Church of America was formed in 1973. Kirkwood Presbyterian Church split during these controversial years. Instead of forming a church from the new denomination, they formed a non-denominational church under the leadership of Mike Winship who taught the Sunday school class and was an ordained minister.

On July 27, 1975, fifty-seven people held the first BCC service in Burke Elementary School at the intersection of Burke Lake and Lee Chapel Roads. According to church records, on September 28, 1975, an overwhelming majority of the congregation voted to become an unaffiliated, non-denominational community church. One month later, eighty-three people signed the charter of Burke Community Church with Winship serving as the first senior pastor. Burke Community Church featured Bible-centered

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teachings for all educational levels in Sunday school classes as well as weekly study groups that met in homes.

Burke Community Church outgrew Burke Elementary School and moved to the larger Cardinal Forest Elementary School. In 1978 the church purchased five acres of property and began planning to build a worship center with educational space. As the church continued to grow, it moved to a larger space at Lake Braddock Secondary School in June of 1978 and utilized that space until 1986. The church set up and tore down equipment every Sunday.

On October 1, 1984, Burke Community Church had its first change of senior leadership as Paul Hansen became the second senior pastor. The five-acre property owned by Burke Community Church would not accommodate the growth, and the church bought a building on Old Keene Mill Road from a Pentecostal church that closed. The first service in the new building was in September of 1986. There have been multiple additions and updates to the facilities, including the education wing completed in 2000 that doubled the size of the church.

Another church split happened during this time. Hansen wanted to disband the elder board and create a new board of apostles. He left the church and was unsuccessful in starting a new congregation in the area. On May 1, 2002, Jack Elwood began serving as the third senior pastor. The church grew again and in 2006 it added space for secondary students and a children’s auditorium. In October of 2007, Elwood left to lead a church in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. The current senior pastor Marty Baker arrived from Stockton, California on November 1, 2008.
Burke Community Church was averaging 600 attendees on a Sunday morning when Baker arrived. There has been steady growth over the past nine years. Burke Community Church currently has an average of 2,800 attendees on Sunday mornings. It is breaking ground on the last phase of the master building plan that was approved by Fairfax County soon after they bought the property in the late 1980s. It will include a large worship area, kitchen, fellowship hall, offices, and adult education classrooms.

When Elwood left in 2007, the elders and staff established a new mission statement. Of the seven elders, four had been through a discipleship program with the parachurch organization Navigators. The group considered the Navigators’ motto and believed it was perfect for the church. The statement became “to know Christ and to make him known.” It is a concise statement that summarizes the purpose and activities of Burke Community Church. The explanation of the statement is reviewed in each church membership class and the following explanation is in the membership class book:

The first half of this equation, derived from the Great Commandment, deals with the believer’s responsibility to God (discipleship). The second half of this equation, derived from the Great Commission, deals with the believer’s responsibility to non-believers (evangelism).

The Great Commandment: Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matt. 22:36-40)

The Great Commission: [Jesus said,] “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt. 28:19-20)

As a church, we are constantly and passionately committed to fulfilling these mandates of Jesus Christ. How do we realize this lofty, God-honoring vision? Our

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process is simple. God has given us His presence and His power in order for us to join Him to accomplish His mission.  

The church wants to be about training attendees to grow in their love for God and others. As the church becomes more mature, it will seek to spread the love of God to people who do not know Him.

**Adult Ministries Discipleship Program**

The Clinging Cross, Coins and Comfort project will take place in the life group ministry of Burke Community Church. As discussed before, Burke Community Church has a long history of adults meeting in homes as small groups since the church began. Life groups have always supported the mission of maturing believers in Christ.

The church membership class is the main place for casting vision for life groups. Currently Burke Community Church has 699 members. The elder board reviews the membership roles each year to make sure the members are active in the church. As a church of 2,800 regular Sunday attenders, membership represents only a fraction of those who call Burke Community Church their church home. But the average number of people attending life groups is a little over four hundred. Therefore, a high percentage of attenders hear the vision and understand its importance and integrate it into their lives.

The groups meet on a weekly or biweekly basis. They are encouraged to have an informal time to get to know each other and what God is doing in their lives. The main purpose it not to study the Bible. The following is stated in the membership book:

> Each group chooses the Bible study they will pursue together, although we recommend that studies not exceed 12 meetings. The study portion should be a

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9 Baker et al., Discover Burke, 5.
place where deeper discussions about spiritual truths and realities connect pragmatically to life. It should not, however, be the primary place for followers of Christ to study God’s Word. Other Grow areas are available specifically for Bible study. Our goal is to have members of our life groups encouraging each other to participate in each part of Growing at BCC. In this way, the life group helps each member focus on the whole of BCC’s discipleship focus: worship, fellowship, study, service, and witness.\textsuperscript{10}

If a group spent the whole meeting time listening and ministering to one of the attendees, then that would be a successful meeting time. If a group covered a great Bible study but did not hear from a person who was hurting, then that meeting time would be a failure. Especially as the church has grown in attendance on Sunday mornings, the passion for groups to meet in order to care for one another has grown in the vision of the staff and elder board. For the first time in ten years, every single elder is attending a life group.

Life groups fall within the overall mission of Burke Community Church. Their piece of the mission statement is making disciples in the community. The elder board and pastoral staff at Burke Community Church developed a three-word pneumonic to help people remember how the staff and elders lead people to mature in their relationship with Jesus. The words are gather, grow and go.

The first term, gather, describes our main entry into the church community. Out of all the programing at Burke Community Church, the Sunday morning experience is where most people first engage the church community. Therefore, we emphasize the importance of what happens during our Sunday morning services:

We “gather” together as believers in Christ to engage with God and with each other in song, prayer, and hearing the preaching of God’s Word. Someone new to our church first typically engages our church family during this time of worship. In the creative, comfortable worship environment we are establishing, people are

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 50.
instructed and inspired by our journey with God and others. During the Sunday morning hour, the church models the actions we are to live as “living sacrifices” (Romans 12:1) which is our very worship.\textsuperscript{11}

The three main aspects of our time are singing, teaching, and giving. We sing a majority of songs that are played on Christian radio stations, with an occasional hymn. Our teaching is Bible-knowledge focused with relevance and application secondarily emphasized. Lastly, a prayer introduces the giving time and a basket is passed among the congregation during a song.

The second term, grow, describes the best next step to mature in the faith at Burke Community Church. The ministries that primarily support this mission are centered around the Great Commandment to love the Lord and the golden rule to love others as you want to be loved. As a person grows to know God, they are better equipped to love Him and others.

There are five main ministries that support the vision of growing. Each ministry has a unique time and place they meet to provide the opportunity for as many people as possible can attend. These include life groups, men’s ministry, women’s ministry, equipping core classes, and adult Bible classes. All five ministries have a strong component of studying the Bible in their outworking.

The gender-based groups meet regularly throughout the year on Tuesday mornings and Wednesday nights for study. The studies are normally in large group formats that break off into small groups for discussions. The men’s and women’s ministries both have a yearly weekend away for developing relationship and further

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 44.
study. There are events throughout the calendar year to encourage connection to the group so that a new person can feel comfortable in engaging in the studies.

The equipping core classes and the adult Bible classes meet on the weekends. They are more often lecture-style classes that do not have a small-group discussion component. Relationships in this format are not emphasized, and there are no programs associated with them for connecting people in any way outside of the lecture time.

The last term for the path of a disciple to mature in Christ at Burke Community Church is go. Attendees are encouraged to find an area of service in or outside the church. Everyone is encouraged to build relationships with those outside the church to share the gospel with them. At the end of every membership class, a group of pastors and directors attend and cast vision for the ministry they lead and explain opportunities to serve within those ministries. There are no direct ministries associated with go. There is a five-person committee that includes the adult generation pastor that divides up money to go to certain local, national, and international missionaries.

**Church Leadership**

Burke Community Church is staff run and elder approved. The paid staff runs the day-to-day operations of the church. The elders lead the church by their participation within the ministries and approving the direction of the church as expressed to them by the senior and executive pastors. As a former member of the staff, it is important to understand the current staff and their dynamics to best integrate the project within the life of the church.
The Burke Community Church leadership team is divided into six categories.\textsuperscript{12} The six categories consist of three paid staff and three volunteers. The three professional teams consist of the executive team, directors, and support staff. The executive team has oversight and leadership of the directors. The support staff is led by the directors.

The executive staff has four members. Two of the four, the senior and executive pastors, also attend elders meetings. The adult and next generation pastors lead all ministries outside of those involved in the main Sunday morning worship and operations.

The director team has six members. The adult generation pastor leads the women’s director, the life group director, and an associate pastor who serves multiple roles. The next generation pastor leads the children’s director and the middle school director. The executive pastor leads the operations director. The executive pastor also leads the worship ministry.

The seven deacons that serve as specific congregational care ministry leaders serve under the leadership of the adult generation pastor. Two deacons serve those who are sick, in the hospital, or grieving. One deacon administers the benevolence funds for those in and outside the church that have financial needs. The physical needs deacon coordinates the household maintenance needs to those who are unable to afford professional help. The meals deacon coordinates food for those people going through difficult times. The new life deacon comes alongside pregnant mothers to celebrate the upcoming birth and to be a resource to her during the pregnancy through the first six months after birth. Finally, the special events deacon coordinates meals for large group

\textsuperscript{12} Burke Community Church, “Staff,” accessed June 1, 2017, http://burkecommunity.com/about/staff.
meetings such as congregational meetings and memorial services. The focus of the deacon team is to meet the tangible needs of the congregation, especially those who may be on the fringes of the community life. The ministry of this project could expand to be used by the deacons and their teams.

The elder board consists of seven men. They are voted into leadership by the congregation and serve three-year terms. An elder can lead up to six years continuously but then must rotate off the board for at least a year. The following is a description of the qualities of an elder and their actions:

The elders are responsible to rule the church by precepts and example (Heb. 13:7, 17). The way they live is what makes their precepts believable. Elders are responsible for the spiritual life and direction of the church. They are also responsible to work together as a team. When items are voted on which effect the church, the elders must all be in agreement (1 Cor. 1:10). Further, based upon Acts 20:28-35, the elders are to be cognizant of five key duties: (1) to keep in fellowship with Jesus; (2) to teach the milk and meat of the Word; (3) to protect the flock from false teachers; (4) to pray and pour over God’s Word; and (5) to be free from self-interests.13

Burke Community Church considers itself elder-led where the majority of decisions about the mission of the church rests on the elders’ shoulders. The decision to integrate the final project within the church did not have to be vetted by the elder board.

Burke Community Church is a non-denominational church and has no formal or informal affiliations with any other religious groups. The desire of the church from its inception as it split from another church was to be a conservative, Protestant church that was as open theologically as it could be. Therefore, the statement of faith and stated theological boundaries are relatively small compared to a denomination or seminary.

13 Baker et al., Discover Burke, 89.
Nondenominational Statement of Faith

The statement of faith is couched in three statements. Each statement qualifies the others: “In essential beliefs, we pursue unity. In nonessential beliefs, we embrace liberty. In all our beliefs, we practice charity (love).”\footnote{Ibid., 76.} The church wants to be firm in the truth, not bending to the flows of culture norms and mores. But it wants to be able to embrace as many people as it can discern who are in the family of God with sound doctrine. Though the church may miss the mark on both statements, the hope is to be able to love all people in and outside the family of Jesus Christ.

Burke Community Church has eleven essential core doctrines. In the membership class book, the statement of faith is introduced with a paragraph called “The Essentials”:

At BCC, we accept, and hold as the essentials of our faith, those areas of doctrinal teaching on which, historically, there has been general agreement among all true Christians. Because of the unique, open nature of a community church, we desire to allow for freedom of belief on other doctrinal matters, provided that any interpretation is based upon the Bible alone, and that no such interpretation shall become an issue which hinders the ministry to which God has called us. The following represents what we believe to be the essentials of our faith. Among the members of this Body, there should be total agreement on these essentials.\footnote{Ibid.}

The statement of faith is given to clarify what doctrines members must be able to affirm for membership at the church. A nonmember can serve in any volunteer position except ministry leadership and teaching positions.

The statement of faith paints with a broad stroke of theology that allows many people who identify themselves as Christians to be welcomed into the fellowship.\footnote{Ibid., 76-80.}
is understood as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is three persons and one essence. Jesus Christ is God who was fully human, died, resurrected, and ascended. Trinitarian view of God and the incarnation of Jesus are very important to understanding pain and suffering. Since the Trinity has known loss and pain, there is eternal consequence for all human suffering as well. The Bible is the core basis of believing. BCC believes in the error free inspiration of Scripture. Mankind is made in the image of God and created to honor Him. Sin entered the world in a historic fall. Sin is disobeying God and trying to meet the needs of a person without Him.

The soteriological viewpoint of BCC is that redemption and salvation are entirely a work of God and not achieved by human merit. People must receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior by faith in Him alone. Salvation for BCC is essentially about life after death. The deliverance of God to save in the present time from harm or health is not addressed. But eternal life is life forever, beginning with the restored relationship with God. Assurance of salvation is held because the work of salvation is by God and no human can take away what God has given. The teaching of BCC about eternal life and assurance would help someone struggling with pain in suffering. Eternal life is not escaping this world but living in relationship with God now. Assurance can help a person understand that they do not have to fear punishment from God when they are His children. Pain is easily misunderstood as punishment. Sanctification means the process of becoming more like God in being set apart for doing His will. Pain is a powerful tool in the hands of God for modeling His followers into living more like Him. The eschatology of the church is simple in that Christ’s return is certain and will be in His resurrected body. The timing is unknown and believers are encouraged to live as if it will be any
minute. Judgment is for believers and non-believers. For those who are Christians their works will be judged and they will receive what they are due. Non-believers will experience a second death and experience everlasting destruction. The Church is the body of Christ consisting of all believers everywhere. Lastly, Burke Community Church practices believer’s baptism and communion. It is clarified that they are not means of salvation.

Burke Community Church is almost fifty years old. It has experienced steady growth and very little major turmoil. It is a healthy church with some typical problems of a community of 2,800 people.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many different ways to reflect on and learn from pain and suffering. The contemplation of the cross is essential to worship, gratitude, and honoring expectations of the life of a follower of Christ. God has purposes for pain but those uses do not equate to peaceful experiences. Followers of Christ are to learn that God is in the midst of trials, not helpless to stop them. He is most real when sought in perilous places. The church can become what it was called to be when it embraces what humans naturally want to escape. This chapter explores books that address these themes.

Moltmann: The Crucified God

Jurgen Moltmann places the cross into the center of theology in *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*.¹ The book looks beyond the cross as simply a means of salvation. The death of Jesus is the way to eternal grace but it is also far more.

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Moltmann answers academic issues of the cross of Christ throughout the book. He addresses questions a person without theological training would not be able to articulate. But the questions are relevant and his answers extremely helpful. A major issue of understanding the nature of God is seen in the cross: “The epistemological principle of the theology of the cross can only be this dialectic principle: the deity of God is revealed in the paradox of the cross.”\(^2\) A person must embrace the paradox of the unity of the triune God when the Father and the Spirit are absent during the time that the Son is on the cross. Moltmann calls on the reader to embrace this paradox rather than attempt a logical understanding that is contrary to the rest of Scripture. God is all-powerful and forever a good and loving God. To know God in the midst of the horror of the cross is an important understanding to desire. For in “that ‘God,’ the ‘supreme being’ and the ‘supreme good,’ should be revealed and present in the abandonment of Jesus by God on the cross, is something that it is difficult to desire. . . . It is the suffering of God in Christ, rejected and killed in the absence of God, which qualifies Christian faith as faith, and as something different from the projection of man’s desires.”\(^3\) God is not giving out tickets to an eternal life with Him without cost. The acceptance of the gift takes no merit of the recipient. But the grace given by God is costly to Himself in a way those who follow can only affirm by faith.

In the culture of pleasure and champions, Christians find it difficult to place a crucified God in their lives. God is love and love will always win. But loving each other

\(^2\) Ibid., 27.

\(^3\) Ibid., 37.
is a difficult proposition. People sin, transgress, and harm each other purposely or unintentionally. God meets those He loves at the difficult reality of love: “For love leaves us open to wounding and disappointment. It makes us ready to suffer. It leads us out of isolation into a fellowship with others, with people different from ourselves, and this fellowship is always associated with suffering.” He has loved and He has suffered. Followers join Him, with all others, at the connection of suffering and pain.

The life of Jesus from His incarnation to His death is not an easy life to comprehend. The teachings of Jesus Himself and the historical events of His death are enough to confound believers, not to mention those who do not have faith. Moltmann examines Jesus and notes, “He who proclaimed that the kingdom was near died abandoned by God. He who anticipated the future of God in miracles and in casting out demons died helpless on the cross. He who revealed the righteousness of God with an authority greater than Moses died according to the provision of the law as a blasphemer.” The most difficult issues of the nature of God in Jesus are wrapped around the foolishness and audacity of the cross. Believers need to reconsider the cross of Christ to be able to wrestle with the fullness of the love of God.

Those who follow Christ should consider the difficulties in the life of Jesus with the earthly powers of Rome and the Jewish leaders. But there is wisdom to relate the power struggle of this world to the spiritual world as well. The gospels give multiple accounts of Jesus exorcising demons. But a greater struggle was in relationship to the

\[\text{4 Ibid., 62-63.}\]
\[\text{5 Ibid., 125.}\]
highest of powers: “We can understand it only if we see his death not against his relationship to the Jews and the Romans, to the law and to the political power, but in relation to his God and Father, who closeness and who grace he himself had proclaimed.” Christians must look beyond the earthly conflicts that surrounded Jesus to comprehend the fullness of His pain and what sin cost. People can slightly identify with conflicts in the relationships of family and nation. People can imagine the fight for freedom as a powerless nation against an overwhelming world power. But no one can fathom the intimacy within the Godhead that Jesus forsook for the love of His creation on the cross.

Knowing who God is by the love of the Father to the Son within the rejection of the cross is essential. The ability to relate to the depth of the suffering of Jesus is an important part of bridging the gap between a mental comprehension of who He is and what He has done and a life-changing revolution. Moltmann explains, “Sharing in the sufferings of this time, Christian theology is truly contemporary theology. Whether or not it can be so depends less upon the openness of theologians and their theories to the world and more upon whether they have honestly and without reserve come to terms with the death-cry of Jesus for God.” It is a challenge not to seek the ends of the crucifixion as the way of atonement, justice, or victory. The church needs to hear His anguish and the despair by which the whole Godhead embraced the pain to bring us to Himself.

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6 Ibid., 146.
7 Ibid., 153.
Lewis: The Problem of Pain

C.S. Lewis writes *The Problem of Pain* in a winsome, intelligent and reasonable way. The purpose of the book is not to explain how to live with pain and suffering. The book is his attempt to answer some of the philosophical problems about a good God who allows pain that He could end but does not.

People all want a good life. It is human to want a life without the pains and concerns that come at a constant pace. A part of the quest in life is learning what makes a good life really a good life. It is not as easy as it may seem. Therefore when the church considers the ways of the goodness of God, it needs to reconsider what is good. Lewis urges the reader to contemplate that “the Divine ‘goodness’ differs from ours, but it is not merely different: it differs from ours not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child’s first attempt to draw a wheel.” The life people want to live is often not nearly as good as they want nor as good as God desires. Lewis marks an important point for people to submit to God’s goodness and relinquish our understanding of good to His.

Reconciling the identity of the true Godhead from the finite imaginations of people is a foundational step in maturity. But from the beginning of time, as humans have seen through the historical narratives in the Bible, they have always wanted the world to be about themselves. The world does not revolve around a person therefore “the problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word ‘love,’ and look on things as if man

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9 Ibid., 35.
were the centre of them. Man is not the centre. God does not exist for the sake of man.”

God is always at work. He uses the pain and suffering of mankind for good. People might not directly experience that goodness, but it is still good.

Pain began somewhere at sometime. The Bible identifies pain as originating from the fall in the beginning of creation. In the chapter titled “The Fall of Man,” Lewis describes how man is unable to live the life God intended due to free will. For God “made all things good and for the sake of their goodness; that one of the good things He made, namely, the free will of rational creatures, by its very nature included the possibility of evil; and that creatures, availing themselves of this possibility, have become evil.” One can see the free will of man as a poor gift compared to the evil that results from sin and suffering. Lewis emphasizes the importance and existence of freewill. God was not surprised by what His creation did and the consequences of freewill did not wreck His plans for His creation. God knew what He was doing from the start: “God saw the crucifixion in the act of creating the first nebula. The world is a dance in which good, descending from God, is disturbed by evil arising from the creatures, and the resulting conflict is resolved by God’s own assumption of the suffering nature which evil produces.” God did not create the evil by which suffering flows. God loves, has always loved, and will always love His creation so much that He suffers with it. Suffering is no mistake. Suffering is a fruit of love born from the Creator giving life.

10 Ibid., 43.
11 Ibid., 61.
12 Ibid., 74-75.
Lewis addresses the worst of suffering, the one that ends in death. A person cannot reason that pain is a form of sanctification when trial does not give reflection or repentance. Those who die out of love and commitment to Christ in martyrdom do not benefit from their sufferings in this life. Pain is a part of life and it can bring us closer to God. Therefore Lewis states, “The real problem is not why some humble, pious, believing people suffer, but why some do not. Our Lord Himself, it will be remembered, explained salvation of those who are fortunate in this world only by referring to the unsearchable omnipotence of God.”\textsuperscript{13} A believer’s expectation in life should be a measure of pain.

**Lane: The Solace of Fierce Landscapes**

Belden Lane walks the reader through his theological reflections and personal remembrances of his mother’s struggle with cancer and Alzheimer’s disease in *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*.\textsuperscript{14} Lane claims that God reveals much through dry, thirsty places according to history and the author’s experiences. He explains that people should not miss the lessons of life that God reveals to us in the desert as they pine for the promised land.

Lane considers the end of the book of Job when God finally answers Job with many questions, questions which lead Job to consider his place in the whole of the created world. God teaches us through Job “that the rich mystery of life continues,

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 93.

stubbornly separate from all of Job’s anxious longings. His anxieties are absorbed into a
dreaded landscape that goes on perfectly well without him, even though it surely seemed
in the bleak corridors of his own imagination that nothing could have continued beyond
the enormity of his suffering.”15 God does not answer Job’s questions, but His words give
healing where answers may have overwhelmed. Souls do not long for the impossible
solutions, but seek for what God alone can provide.

The book repeatedly emphasizes that silence is a great teacher. When a person is
in pain, the natural reaction is to say something in order to bring comfort. But most times
people do not have the ability or the words to bring a person comfort in his or her pain.
There is a temptation to fill the air with some words or general truths. But a better way is
often without words, for “the hazards of language must be acknowledged by all those
who are tempted to speak where they had best keep silent.”16 There is power in one’s
presence that can be quickly lost by trying to say something.

Lane still opens up the place for words as well as silence. In the midst of the
deserts people need to know the real need and call upon God who will hear. But words
are important in comfort even if they can so easily distract. The author brings to the
forefront two powerful prayers, the Jesus Prayer and the Lord’s Prayer, that have helped
others through the dark days. During the last moments of my son’s life, all I could do was
pray the Lord’s Prayer over and over again. I was so concerned I would not have the
words to say goodbye, so I focused on the words I knew were right to say. Lane explains,

15 Ibid., 55.
16 Ibid., 68.
“Repeated over and over again, the simple prayer has an effect of silencing the anxious ego, with all its wearying demands for attention, for intellectual certainty and the comforting assurances of home.” When my son’s heart beat its last beat, God gave me the words to pull my broken family together to send my son running into the arms of Jesus. My mind went from full of everything down to nothing, so I could know how to speak life into my son’s death. Centering my mind on the model prayer helped ease my heart and allowed my words to bring healing into the most desperate situation.

Lane concludes that people can know God best when they come to the end of their ability to grasp anything. God is beyond understanding, but people should seek to see Him where they think He cannot be found. The emptiness of fierce landscapes teach “a radical letting-go of the thinking-experiencing-managing self, so as to be content with God alone, a God without adjectives, without comforting signs of presence, so that at last one learns truly to delight in nothing. This nothing may be ultimately disclosed... as ‘Something,’ as the Holy Trinity hidden in light inaccessible from every effort to grasp its mystery.” For God is always there, but often not seen by the distractions of mission, gifts, and questions. God is, and that is how to know Him.

Keller: Walking with God through Pain and Suffering

Timothy Keller writes an in-depth treatise on pain and suffering with Walking with God through Pain and Suffering. It is an important work because no one is safe

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17 Ibid., 200.

18 Ibid., 225.
from life and “Life is tragic.”20 In part one Keller explains how people outside of Christianity have viewed suffering and what Christ brings to the conversation. In part two he describes how challenging suffering is for all believers. In part three he explains practically how we can walk with God through the pains of life.

Keller summarizes Western society’s plight with pain in the first part of the book. Even though the Christian church has made a significant influence on the culture, Western societies are at their core secular. Therefore, even Christians are heavily slanted to understand the working of God from a standpoint not found in Scripture. Western persons “see ourselves as able to control our own destiny, able to discern for ourselves what is right and wrong, and we see God as obligated to arrange things for our benefit, especially if we live a good enough life according to our own chosen standards.”21 The culture expects God to bend the world to meet righteous desires or at least those that are not sinful. Therefore, when pain comes the west is at a loss to see what God could be doing.

Keller details a number of reasons that pain and suffering enter into lives of people. God could be chastening a person in rebellion to lead them to repentance. God could be exposing unconscious sin to bring it into the light. But God does not always let us see or understand the presence of pain. Keller states, “Christianity never claims to be able to offer a full explanation of all God’s reasons behind every instance of evil and


20 Ibid., 3.

21 Ibid., 57.
suffering – it does have a final answer to it. That answer will be given at the end of history and all who hear it and see its fulfillment will find it completely satisfying, infinitely sufficient.”

Therefore Christians have a hope that is assured through the worst of circumstances. When people cannot comprehend or see what God could be doing, Christ followers still know it will all be made right in eternity.

Keller, while being thorough about how to navigate through suffering, highlights the importance of the unique peril each individual faces. Categories and lists help get a feel for the issues but can easily make a person overconfident in how to move forward. Keller explains, “When it comes to suffering there are diversities of shape, temperaments, and pathways. There are multiple truths that the Bible teaches about suffering, and these different truths need to be applied in a different order depending on circumstance, stage and temperament. But there is also a diversity of expression of those truths and ideas.”

Caution is in strict order while anyone attempts to exegete their own or someone else’s circumstances. But Keller is still able to gently equip the reader with multiple pieces of wisdom to navigate different trials.

Keller traverses the story of Job to give encouragement and motivation to pray to God in the midst of struggles. When people are in the dark, it can feel impossible to look for the light. Job gives us a righteous example of how to prevail: “Through it all, Job never stopped praying. Yes, he complained, but he complained to God. He doubted, but he doubted to God. He screamed and yelled, but he did it in God’s presence. No matter

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22 Ibid., 158.
23 Ibid., 219.
how much in agony he was, he continued to address God. He kept seeking Him. And in the end, God said Job triumphed.”²⁴ Keller gives much wisdom in not seeking a right way to approach God from Job’s example but highlighting Job’s zeal towards God. The frustration and anxiety that Job communicates is a treasure to the reader. Job is not chastised for his questions or his wounded heart. Prayer can be whatever someone is able to say at that time and is essential to successfully walking with God through trials.

**Scazerro: The Emotionally Healthy Leader**

Pete Scazerro explains how to lead well by deep living in *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World.*²⁵ The book does not focus on the theological or practical issues of pain and suffering. But if the instructions he gives are followed, the reader is as prepared as he or she can be to survive or thrive in the trials that come from moral failure or bad leadership. If a person could become an emotional healthy leader, then he or she would better prepared to mature from the pain and suffering that will no doubt accompany a thriving ministry.

It is a dangerous temptation to try to lead others by first leading others. Scazerro rightly highlights the fact that a leader cannot lead well without first being a healthy person. He exhorts the reader to “build into your leadership strong rhythms and boundaries of proper self-care. The biblical principle is ‘Watch your life… closely’ (1 Timothy 4:16). Since you are in people preparing work, it is vital that you steward

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²⁴ Ibid., 287.

²⁵ Peter Scazerro, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).
yourself well.”

26 The Christian leader has no power to lead if that person is not personally strong for the fight that is already happening or will soon be.

Scazerro does an excellent job equipping people in multiple ways to choose good self-care. One of the best ways is one that I find most difficult to incorporate in my life. He encourages everyone to take a Sabbath rest. He defines it as “a twenty-four hour block of time in which we stop work, enjoy rest, practice delight, and contemplate God.”

27 It is very important to release from activity to realize that you are not essential to life. God is the only necessity. Building in time to focus on God and rest in Him prepares a person for the times when there is no time to stop and rest. If a person waits until they are thirsty to drink, it is too late to hydrate properly. Therefore, Christ followers need to set aside a day each week to lean on the only One who can do what their hearts and the people they lead need.

Learning to embrace what a person cannot do is just as important as realizing what they are gifted to do. Leaders can easily strive to be and do everything. But God has given each person a gift: “Limits are often simply God’s gifts in disguise. This makes them one of the most counterintuitive, difficult truths in Scripture to embrace. It flies in the face of our natural tendency to want to play god and run the world.”

28 Through the past years I have realized how little is in my control and therefore how awful I am at playing God. Being a divorced man in ministry is a very limiting factor. Per the

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26 Ibid., 107.
27 Ibid., 146.
28 Ibid., 205-206.
stipulations of the divorce, I can live only in Fairfax County to share custody of my children. Choosing to see these limiting factors as gifts is essential in leading well into the future. My options are now much narrower, which allows me to better discern future ministry options. Each of us only have so much time and opportunity. God demands no more than He gives.

In the past few years I have had traumatic endings in my life. Divorce, getting fired from the pastorate, and the death of my middle son are things that I do not want to embrace. Scazzero emphasizes that “embracing endings in order to receive new beginnings is one of the fundamental tasks of the spiritual life – and this is especially true for Christian leaders. Not every problem can or should be solved or overcome; some things just need to be allowed to die. This isn’t necessarily a failure.” He goes on to list different types of suffering: “A loved one dies, suffers cancer or another serious illness, or we experience divorce, job downsizing, economic hardship, an affair, a broken dream – even the aging process itself.” Those hurts resonate with me on multiple levels. The enemy has caused me to struggle mightily at times with my failed marriage and inability to protect my young son. I have considered myself a complete failure as a human being. At times it seems impossible to move forward. Reading that these are not failures is extremely important. Hearing from counselors, family, and friends that there was nothing more I could do is important. But to move forward in leadership, we must be able to own the opportunities that no longer exist in order to see what avenues are open before us.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 270.
Sunquist: Understanding Christian Mission

Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory is a missions textbook by Scott Sunquist. Through biblical references, history, and many personal examples, Sunquist gives a thorough overview of Christians on mission for God. His thesis is that “Mission is from the heart of God, to each context, and it is carried out in suffering in this world for God’s eternal glory.” The mission of the church is imitating the mission of God Himself and is lived differently in different places and times through much difficulty that will all end to the glory of God.

Sunquist sees the purposes of God clearly in suffering. The undercurrent of the book is God’s activity in the midst of the pains of life. The author sees that “suffering has a way of focusing one’s life and thoughts. It must not be forgotten that Christianity was born in suffering and oppression, inspired by a prophet who was identified with suffering (passio: to suffer).” Life cannot be lived without experiencing different measures of pain. Jesus Christ Himself not only suffered but is known as the man of Sorrows. Therefore through history, God has done great work out of the fires of pain.

The hope of the world is not based upon the skills and merits of people. Sunquist notes that “in the history of Christianity we can see, as in a mirror darkly, Christian mission as the public movement of God through broken individuals and institutions. We have seen the church at times almost ignore its charter or commission from Christ, and at

32 Ibid., xii.
33 Ibid., 28.
other times we have seem moments of humble, suffering service in the pattern of Jesus Christ to bring about redemption of people and cultures.”\textsuperscript{34} The church is to be a light on a hill. But being that light does not mean being without blemish or struggle. God works through both our successes and our failures.

Sunquist highlights the importance of suffering in the church. He states that “the central image of this story is the cross, and the central participation or celebration is the Eucharist. Christian mission must always in some way point to the cross and seek to celebrate this mercy for us in Eucharistic splendor.”\textsuperscript{35} The church tells the good story again and again. The good news is rooted in a horrific torture device and the main activity all believers participate in is the Lord’s Supper. The blood shed and the body given have been celebrated by a common meal shared throughout the centuries. Believers take what was sacrificed on the cross and physically consume Him. Followers of Christ cannot ignore the role of suffering in the life of a believer because the main image and celebration are based on a tortuous death.

Suffering comes in many different forms. The activity of sharing the gospel is one that invites pain. The act of “evangelism requires the death of something – security, comfort, relationships – so that new life can be planted. The seed of faith must be planted in broken, aerated, and irrigated soil. The work of sowing seed is just that: work.”\textsuperscript{36} The mission given to all believers requires much sacrifice by the nature of the work itself:

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 169.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 205.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 300.
“The normal Christian life is a life of witness, and a life of witness counts the cost and enters into the struggles of the Kingdom. Witness, as Jesus reminds us, will not always be welcome, and it will not always be comfortable.”37 The fact that Christians are aliens and strangers in this world is an example of how they cannot simply fit in and fade away. Believers are a peculiar people with a mission riddled with uncomfortable labor. It can be no other way. The world murdered the God/Man at the center of the message. The church should expect no greater welcome than how the Messiah was received.

A person who is committed to Jesus and His mission must expect trouble. The members of the Church are to live out their lives in His way and to His end. Living for others in a world of injustice that leads to pain is part of the plan. The call is to live in powerlessness and misery until the church is called to the One who set the example unto death itself. Sunquist notes, “Missionary existence is life in Christ, and life in Christ is a call to be faithful unto death. Much is communicated about the gospel of salvation through a weak, poor, and suffering servant. Less is communicated about the gospel through a comfortable and wealthy short-term visitor. The call to missionary service is the call to come and die.”38 The historical reality of the life of a follower of God is not health or wealth. Our savior, Lord, teacher, and example had no home and died a lonely death. The goal is to seek to follow Jesus into a life of mission through pain for His glory.

37 Ibid., 303.

38 Ibid., 409.
CHAPTER 3

A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN PAIN AND SUFFERING

The chapter will examine the way pain and suffering can be known in community. Suffering and death exist in the present reign of God. The gospel of the kingdom is still good news even when a person is not delivered from pain. God knows suffering and the Church can better know God in its interactions with pain. For the Trinity has suffered in the life and death of Jesus. The idea that we can or should escape suffering confuses the very gospel that gives hope. Therefore this chapter will explore the gospel in the reality of present pain and the assured future. Lastly, the multiple purposes of pain will be considered in the perspectives of the fellowship the Church as it follows Jesus Christ.

Pain and suffering are an essential part of the Christian life. Without the experience of loss and disappointment, a believer would not know the life that God has ordained for each person. No one should purposely seek suffering. But the life of a believer would not be complete without it, for “sharing in the sufferings of this time, Christian theology is truly contemporary theology. Whether or not it can be so depends less upon the openness of theologians and their theories to the world and more upon
whether they have honestly and without reserve come to terms with the death-cry of Jesus for God.”¹ Jesus writhed in pain. The Son of God was tortured. The Church must consider how it will express love and meaning to those who suffer today. For how a person views the crucifixion is pivotal to how they understand God and their own identity.

To contemplate a theology of pain, a person should first consider the relationship between God and pain. People are tempted to first filter discussions of pain and suffering through their own experiences. Paul gives good advice to first seek to understand God before ourselves, “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). Therefore, to know God in the midst of pain on earth, the search considers God in heaven.

The Trinity and Suffering

God has revealed Himself in three persons of one essence. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are forever one and yet distinct. The gospel of John describes their eternal relationship. The disciple Philip asks Jesus to reveal the Father but Jesus explains, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (Jn 14:10). Jesus and the Father are one essence and one being. Jesus explains that He will be going to the Father and will make a specific request for all of His followers. Jesus will request the Holy Spirit, “and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world

¹ Moltmann, The Crucified God, 153.
cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you” (Jn 14:16, 17). Scripture shows that the Trinity is forever together and in relationship with one another. The Father knew the path that would lead Jesus to the cross.

The Nicene Creed was written to articulate an orthodox view of the Trinity. It describes the three Persons of the Trinity to have always been of the same substance or *homoousios*. God also forever has three distinct persons or *hypostases*. The Trinity has forever been in this relationship. To consider the suffering of Christ on earth, especially on the cross, one needs to reflect on how the whole of the Trinity was affected while considering things in heaven. The early church father Gregory of Nazianzus wrote the following:

> It was not (Jesus, the Son) who was forsaken either by the Father, or by His own Godhead, as some have thought, as if It (the Godhead) were afraid of the Passion, and therefore withdrew Itself from His in His sufferings (for who compelled Him either to be born on earth at all, or to be lifted up on the cross?). But as I said, He was in His own Person representing us. For we were the forsaken and despised before, but now by the suffering of Him who could not suffer, we were taken up and saved. Similarly, He makes His own our folly and our transgressions; and says what follows in the Psalm: for it is very evident that the (Twenty-second) Psalm refers to Christ. ²

Since the Trinity is forever one, the Godhead suffered when Jesus suffered. The Father and Spirit intimately experience the suffering of the Son. The Trinity knows the pain in the midst of their unique relationship.

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Perichoresis is the term used to describe the relationship of the same substance, homoousios, and the different persons, hypostases. There is unity and diversity lived out by perichoresis within the Trinity. Terrance Torrance writes, “The inner reason for this circular and holistic apprehension of God in his Trinity is already evident in the completely homoousial interrelations of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in which as distinct hypostases they share equally, individually and together, and are the one identical Being of the Lord God Almighty.”

God is one yet has in Himself three eternal persons. So how the Trinity relates to Himself in the same substance can be described “through the concept of perichoresis that this became fully confirmed, in realization of the truth that no divine Person is he who he really and truly is, even in his distinctive otherness, apart from relation to the other two in their mutual containing or interpenetrating of one another in such a way that each Person is in himself whole God of whole God.”

God is in Himself relational and has forever been in that relationship.

The way the Godhead affirms and edifies each other is easier to imagine than how they suffer together. The capstone of anguish felt by Jesus on the cross is expressed when He quotes Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34). Jesus relates with the psalmist David in His feelings of abandonment and rejection. The Son cries out to the Godhead with a psalm sung from generations of worshipers who have felt alone and apart from God. Johnson notes that this moment is replete with Trinitarian significance. As the third-century theologian Gregory Nazianzus recognized, Jesus’ cry expresses the agony of God, the Son being lifted

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4 Ibid.
up to God the Father through the mediation of the Spirit... Jesus’ cry is the
decisive divine embrace of the fragility, suffering, and despair that mark the
human condition. Indeed, God is never more divine than in God’s determination
to be our God even unto incarnation, humiliation, and death. 5

The *perichoresis* in the historical act of the sacrificial death on the cross is as divinely
coordinated as the creation of the universe.

Pain is often found in the void of the absence of power. Humans and living things
either run from or attack pain. People go to great lengths to fill the void pain brings with
money, effort, and influence. But Jesus, the most powerful man who has ever lived, calls
out to the supreme power of the universe whom He has always known and hears no
answers. It is easy to mistake the silence as the absence of power or of a loving
relationship. But at this moment the Godhead, not only Jesus, expresses an eternal quality
of *perichoresis*. To understand how God is expressing Himself to the world, Boyd
explains it is necessary
to distinguish between the loving unity that the three divine Persons experience,
on the one hand, and the loving unity that defines God’s eternal essence on the
other. We could say that on the cross, the former was momentarily sacrificed as
an expression of the latter. That is, the divine Person’s sacrificed their previously
uninterrupted experience of perfect loving union in order to express the perfect
loving union that defines them as God. 6

We know who God is by what the Trinity sacrificed to love the world. The love of God
for His people is found in the sacrifice of eternal *perichoresis*. Therefore each Person of
the Trinity is experiencing the unimaginable anguish Jesus expresses in His death cry.

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5 Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, eds., *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and

It is important not to diminish but rather to emphasize the suffering experienced by Jesus on the cross. It is the worst of all suffering, unique to God, who in His sovereign power could do away with all pain, especially that of His only Son. God could have avoided any suffering by His power as the creator and sustainer of the universe. But instead God reveals His love for all creation as Jesus yells out:

That was a cry of utter God-forsakenness, the despairing cry of a man in his dereliction which Jesus had made his own, taking it over from the twenty-second Psalm, thereby revealing that he had penetrated into the ultimate horror of great darkness, the abysmal chasm that separates sinful man from God. But there in the depths where we are exposed to the final judgments of God, Jesus converted man’s atheistical shout of abandonment and desolation into a prayer of commitment and trust, ‘Father into thy hands I commend my spirit.’ The Son and the Father were one and not divided, each dwelling in the other, even in that ‘hour and power of darkness’ when Jesus was smitten of God and afflicted and pierced for our transgressions.  

God is forever one. Jesus in His most desperate time knew whom to trust. The Father would not remove the pain and agony of the Son. The Father knew the pain of Jesus, and the Father experienced the pain of watching His Son suffer even though He could have spared Him. The Father loves the Son and had the power to end His suffering but did not. The Father loved Jesus and all who Jesus redeemed by allowing Him to suffer.

Jesus spoke the truth of His heart when he expressed pain and abandonment. But Jesus refused to believe what He felt as the final truth. Jesus gives the world His example of faith by His commitment to and trust in His Father even in the midst of His despair. When the Church chooses to trust God as the hope of salvation in the midst of pain and suffering that does not abate, the Church shines like Christ in the present darkness by owning despair and embracing the hope of God who has allowed it to occur.

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The eternal relationship sacrificed for the created is a significant departure from other ancient religions. The full price of pardon is paid by the offended yet forgiving God and in no way merited by the person seeking forgiveness. The sinner is granted life “through the cost of God the Forgiver. It is not, as in old religions, a sacrifice by which unfriendly Godhead is propitiated and induced to have mercy; it is sacrifice made by God Himself in free illimitable love through the loving heart of Jesus and His filial obedience even ‘unto death.’” The Trinity loves perfectly, overcoming what sacrifice demands through a mysterious painful *perichoresis* for the love of the created. From the beginning of all creation God had loved and known the cost of love. The loved experienced by the Trinity always act together in every divine operation whether in creation or redemption, yet in such a way that the distinctive activities of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are always maintained, in accordance with the propriety and otherness of their Persons as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This may be called the ‘*perichoretic* coactivity of the Holy Trinity’. The gospel of John summarizes it by stating, “For God so loved the world He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). Jesus, the incarnate God, has a unique role in the love found in *homoousios*. All of the oneness acts from *hypostases* because “in every creative and redemptive act the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit operate together in fellowship with one another but nevertheless in ways peculiar to each of them.” The incarnation created a special way

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10 Ibid.
for the Trinity to express love for the world. Jesus becoming a man, still bearing the scars on His hands, forever gives witness to an incomprehensible love. God has saved His people through the loving sacrifice of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The love of God is known because of the sacrifice of Jesus and through the loss suffered by the Father and Holy Spirit. Through the power of God, pain, suffering, and death are part of the story of a love that is never broken but made clearer in tragedy. It is the pinnacle of the revelation of God. As God felt the devastation of death and the cruelty of suffering, He expressed His eternal love. Knowing the love of the Trinity, faith escapes the dispute between and the alternative of theism and atheism: God is not only other-worldly but also this-worldly; he is not only God, but also man; he is not only rule, authority and law but the event of suffering, liberating love. Conversely, the death of the Son in not the ‘death of God’, but the beginning of that God event in which the life-giving spirit of love emerges from the death of the Son and the grief of the Father.¹¹

Life is born from death. From the deepest darkness, God created the brightest light. His love shone and continues to shine where without faith, darkness would reign.

**Knowing God through Pain in the Hebrew Narrative**

God working His loving relationship through pain and suffering is replete through the narratives of the Bible. In the Old Testament and New Testament, God reveals His sovereign rule through suffering. From the story of Job to the patriarchs of Israel to the story of the early Church in Acts, God is in the midst of pain to save and reveal Himself through it.

In the earliest Hebrew writings, the theology around pain and suffering are central. Job, a book in the wisdom literature genre and believed to be the oldest in the Bible, places God in the middle of the plight of man in his pain. God is not described as the direct source of the destruction let loose on Job. God is aware and permits the horrific events to take place. The plot of the book is the search for the purpose of pain by Job and his friends.

The book begins with a description of Job and his family. He is a wealthy man who was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Jb 1:1). Job is a striking person who “was the greatest of all people of the east” (Jb 1:3). The righteous character of Job is affirmed by his actions and testimony throughout the rest of the book. Even God affirms that he is “blameless” when God mentions Job to Satan (Jb 1:8).

The author of the book never explains why God brings Job to the attention of Satan. It seems wrong that God would put someone He favors in the target of His enemy. But there is no suggestion that God would have the enemy do Job any harm. God does clearly permit Satan to have his way with what Job possessed and then to harm but not kill Job himself with a horrible skin disease (Jb 1:13-19, 2:4-8). In Job 2:5-6 God is active behind the scenes in the life of Job:

there is a double play on words in the Hebrew which cannot be reproduced in English. First, the word translated ‘power’ is literally ‘hand’: the Adversary had told God to stretch out his hand and strike Job with illness; God places Job in the Adversary’s ‘hand’, thus reinforcing the fact that God is willing to allow Job to be ‘punished’ for wrongs that he has not committed, but keeps his own hands clean.\textsuperscript{12}

In the devastation of his possessions, health, and family, Job does not waver in his trust in God (Jb 1: 22; 2:10).

Until the last movement of the book in chapter 38, Job struggles with understanding why the horrific events happened to him. His friends, once a comfort, often question his integrity and believe the destruction is brought as a judgment against Job (Jb 2:11-13). The reader knows Job is innocent in the matter and thus can empathize with Job during the false accusations. In this piece of wisdom literature, the central figure “Job is more than the hero, more than the main speaker in the dialogue. He is the archetypal suffer, and through his anguished speaking we both come to feel the problem of suffering and watch the way faith and religious experiences can be deepened through that suffering.”¹³ Job exemplifies wisdom during suffering as he searches for God in the midst of the loss and pain.

Job teaches the reader that not all pain and suffering come as judgment. Also devastation does not have to serve as a lesson that the Almighty needed to teach. Suffering can be a mystery with no perceivable purpose. Therefore a person can reflect on their experiences and say “This calamity is not anything I have directly deserved, and when he can further say, I have learnt from this suffering all that I am able to learn, and yet it continues – then he is warranted in claiming for his own the great thought of the Book of Job, the thought that his suffering serves some larger purpose of God, such as the vindication of disinterested piety.”¹⁴ Catastrophe is not necessarily a trial to make a

¹³ Ibid., 6.

sinner more righteous. But in the beginning of the story, God seems proud of Job. He brags about him so much that “God trusts His servant – trusts him with the maintenance of eternal truths, trusts him to stand by them to the last.” Where “we often speak of trusting God; is there not often a neglected truth in the thought that God is trusting us?”

God does not give Job a reason or an excuse in permitting the extreme troubles in his life. When God speaks in Job 38-41, He asks the questions that put Job in context of the glory and power of God Himself. The Lord does not give reasons but reveals more of Himself.

Throughout the narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures God reveals Himself through many different pain-filled episodes. A common thread is the sovereign hand of God is working His will through pain. The following is a summary of the difficult events from the book of Genesis that shape the Jewish story. These events represent and highlight the consistency of trouble by which God has revealed Himself throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

The first couple, Adam and Eve, was cast of out of the garden (Gn 3). In the first generation born to Adam and Eve, Cain murdered Abel (Gn 4). God cleared the earth through a flood and commanded Noah to restart the population of the world (Gn 6-9). The human population could no longer communicate with each other and that brought about a physical division of all humankind (Gn 11). After faithful obedience to the call of God, Abram struggles with infertility. When God miraculously gives Abraham a son, He demands that Abraham sacrifice the boy (Gn 22). When the son of Abraham grows up, Isaac has Jacob who deceives Isaac to give away the blessing due to the first-born Esau.

\[15\] Ibid.
(Gn 27). The lying Jacob gets deceived into marrying the wrong woman (Gn 29). Esau vows to kill Jacob and tracks his brother down. Jacob fears for his life and sends out three different convoys of goods to try to appease his brother. During that time of fear and desperation, a man wrestles with Jacob all night long. Jacob’s hip is ripped out of socket but will not yield. The man blesses Jacob and changes his name to Israel. Jacob believes he wrestled with God himself (Gn 32). Pain is the catalyst in each major plot point in the narrative of Genesis. God gave the name of the Hebrew nation to them during physical and emotional pain when He changed Jacob’s name to Israel.

Jacob, now called Israel, had twelve sons. His sons conspired together and sold his most beloved son Joseph, who was hated by the others (Gn 37). Jacob’s heart was broken, but the hardships of Joseph were just beginning. He became a slave in Egypt, was falsely accused of sexual assault, and got thrown in jail (Gn 39). Yet in jail the “Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison” and “the keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed” (Gn 39:21, 23). God gives His grace to the desperate and rejected. God causes the head of the land of Egypt to have dreams that only Joseph can interpret. Because Joseph could interpret the dreams, he is elevated to the highest position beside the Pharaoh (Gn 40, 41). Since Joseph was in such a place of power, he was able to save and care for his family through a terrible famine (Gn 42). When Jacob dies, the rest of the brothers fear for their lives because of what they did to Joseph. But instead of violence, Joseph explains what God had revealed about Himself through his suffering. He states,
“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Gn 50:19-21). The book of Genesis sets the pattern that continues through the narrative history of the Hebrew Scriptures where God uses hardships for His glory and good. Suffering is a part of the life of a chosen person of God. The history of Israel is one of pain and difficulty that God permitted and used for His good and glory.

**Knowing God through Pain in the Gospel**

The problem of the existence of pain, suffering, and death is key to understanding the love of God. The depth of emotional toil and strife give an important piece of clarity to the reign of God in His kingdom. The church community must embrace the gospel with both pain and victory in mind. Jesus being fully man takes on the reality of despair and anguish. The gospel story of His birth, death, and resurrection are important in that “the Incarnation and the atonement are internally linked, for atoning expiation and propitiation are worked out in the ontological depths of human being and existence into which the Son of God penetrated as the Son of Mary.”\(^{16}\) God experiences birth. God lives and knows the injustice and pains of the world soaked in sin.

God conquers what is wrong by embracing all the consequences. The good news proclaimed by Jesus is felt and spoken in His cries on the cross for “the central conviction of the gospel is that it is precisely because God hears Jesus’ cry that our cries also are

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 50.
heard… When Jesus cried out to God for deliverance, he did so in agony but not in
despair. He died forsaken by all around him, but not by God. And he suffered and died so
that, by the power of the resurrection, suffering and death would not have the last
word.”

Victory is wrapped in pain and death. A person who tries to avoid the reality of
pain and death in the life of a follower of Jesus creates a false gospel. God is forever
known in the absence of joy and in the darkness of death.

The gospel is the core truth for followers of Jesus Christ. The good news is a
major lens by which the Church understands its identity and the God it serves. The
expression of the gospel must be true during the hard times, especially when a person
does not see God saving them from harm.

The gospel according to Mark shows the centrality of the gospel to the teaching of
Jesus. In the first chapter of Mark, the reader sees Jesus “proclaiming the gospel of God,
and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe
in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). The arrival of the messiah comes with the kingdom of God.

A proper understanding of the term gospel is essential for a follower of Christ.
The central preaching point of Jesus is His good news. The word gospel simply means
good news. Thus the next logical step is to identify the object of the good news of God.
In the evangelical roots of Burke Community Church, a follower of Christ would only
hear the term in connection to their own personal salvation to go to heaven due to the
sacrifice of Jesus. But the gospel is more about living in His present kingdom than life
after death.

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17 Brown and Miller, Lament, 86.
In the gospel of Mark, Jesus’ proclamation is in a chiastic form. This structure is a literary tool in Hebrew to show emphasis. Notice the words “the gospel” at the end of both verse 14 and 15. The middle is the most important part: “the kingdom of God is at hand.” The kingdom reality is the essential piece of the good news. In his commentary on the book of Mark, N.T. Wright defines the gospel as

The idea of ‘good news’, for which an older English word is ‘gospel’, had two principal meanings for first-century Jews. First, with roots in Isaiah, it meant the news of YHWH’s long-awaited victory over evil and rescue of his people. Second, it was used in the Roman world for the accession, of birthday of the Emperor. Since for Jesus and Paul the announcement of God’s in breaking kingdom was both the fulfillment of prophecy and a challenge to the world’s present rulers, ‘gospel’ became important shorthand for both the message of Jesus himself and the apostolic message about him. Paul saw this message as itself the vehicle of God’s saving power (Romans 1.16, 1 Thessalonians 2.13).\(^\text{18}\)

God is coming back and to take care of His people. The good news of the kingdom of God has present revolutionary consequences.

Jesus boldly speaks of a new ruler in the midst of a foreign empire. The gospel of Jesus is a bold statement in the face of the prevailing sayings of propaganda such as “Caesar is Lord.” God is present and ruling even though the first century Jews saw the presence of Caesar everywhere. The good news of Jesus proclaims that the invisible God, not the physically tangible Romans, is the true sovereign power. It was the decision of Jesus’ followers to make that truth central to their identity and to align themselves to serve, follow, and trust the God who reigns.

The word kingdom is not as relatable today as in the days of Jesus. The focus is less about geography and more about authority; “it is best to understand the expression

‘kingdom of God’ in the context of the Old Testament’s dynamic use of the term ‘kingdom’ as referring to the reign of a king rather than statically as referring to the territory or realm over which he rules.”\textsuperscript{19} In the plain sense of the word, the kingdom of God is where God rules. Instead of searching for a place, people trusting in God are to look for how God rules his people. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob rules in the hearts and minds of His followers. Jesus preached the good news in the middle of political oppression, religious bigotry, demonic warfare, death, and diseases. God is present and ruling in the midst of the chaos, injustice, and pain. The crucifixion of the King of kings does not dismiss His rule but exemplifies it because Jesus

\begin{quote}
\“came … to penetrate into the innermost existence of Israel in such a way as to gather up its religious and historical dialogue with God into himself, to make its partnership and its conflict with God his own, precisely as they moved to their climax with the Incarnation, and thus in and through Israel to strike at the very root of evil in the enmity of the human heart to God. He came to grapple with evil, therefore, at the very point where under the unrelenting pressure of the self-giving presence and love of God to mankind it was forced to uncover itself in the crucifixion of the incarnate Son of God, and then to deal with it decisively in atoning sacrifice. Thus it is through the weakness of the man on the Cross and on the ground of reconciliation wrought out there that God meets, suffers, and triumphs over the enmity entrenched in human existence and history and over its distortion of the socio-political patterns of human life.\”\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

The good news partners with weakness and pain to put evil away. The powers of the world are used to reveal the power of God.

Jesus preaches about the kingdom of God by displaying His power. By casting out demons, healing the sick, and caring for the least powerful people in His community,


\textsuperscript{20} Torrance, \textit{The Mediation of Christ}, 40-41.
Jesus displays the power of God over any earthly power. It is a power that is still evident in the world today. Yet Jesus submitting to the ruling kingdom of the Jewish authorities and Roman power appears to be the opposite of power. The suffering and humiliation of Jesus on a cross seems contradictory to His good news:

“He who proclaimed that the kingdom was near died abandoned by God. He who anticipated the future of God in miracles and in casting out demons died helpless on the cross. He who revealed the righteousness of God with an authority greater than Moses died according to the provision of the law as a blasphemer. He who spread the love of God in his fellowship with the poor and the sinners met his end between two criminals on the cross. Thus in the end the basic problem and the starting point of Christology is the scandal and folly of the cross.”

The gospel narratives do not smooth over the seemingly paradoxical climax to the ministry of Jesus. Each gospel highlights the importance of the crucifixion. The writers of the New Testament proclaim our hope lies in Jesus on the cross. The gospel story places the problem of the proclamation alongside the fact of horrific death; “The preaching of the kingdom by the poor man Jesus of Nazareth was open to refutation by crucifixion; but by the very fact it was also wholly dependent upon the God who he proclaimed and demonstrated in this way, and not in any other.” Therefore how one views the death of Jesus should directly affect how one understands the central message of the kingdom. There is no dividing the good teaching of Jesus as a master rabbi from the execution of a rebel nailed to a public torture device. For Jesus

Christ and his Gospel belong ontologically and inseparably together, for that is what he is, he who brings, actualizes and embodies the Gospel of reconciliation between God and man and man and God in his own Person. In him the Incarnation and Atonement are one and inseparable, for atoning reconciliation falls within the incarnate constitution of his Person as Mediator, and it is on that


22 Ibid., 131.
ground and from that source that atoning reconciliation embraces all mankind and is freely available to every person.\(^{23}\)

Jesus died to make all wrongs right. This sacrificial act shows the true power and love of the King of kings, God with us, the Lord of all.

In the midst of dying on the tool of political and social oppression, Jesus elicited praise to God. The centurion, the executioner of Jesus, witnessed His death and praised God proclaiming His innocence (Lk 23:46). The people of God should celebrate the victory of God over death. The church should emphasize the power of Jesus over sickness and death. But it must also focus on His willing disenfranchisement:

> when we look at his non-miraculous and helpless suffering and dying in the context of his preaching and his life, we understand how his misery cried out to heaven: it is the experience of abandonment by God in the knowledge that God is not distant but close; does not judge, but shows grace. And this, in full consciousness that God is close at hand in his grace, to be abandoned and delivered up to death as one rejected, is the torment of hell.\(^{24}\)

The feeling of distress and loneliness in the midst of life is part of experiencing intimacy with God who is present in that silence. Jesus knows that silence. The writer of Hebrews instructs the church to “consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Heb 12:3-4). Community forms through shared experiences. Jesus knows the pain that His people feel. Remembering the suffering of Jesus brings courage and strength to face the adversities of

\(^{23}\) Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 73.

the present. The gospel is not the absence of pain and rejection but rather life with God in the midst of troubled times.

**Knowing God through Pain in the Early Church**

The gospels clearly portray that the crucifixion is the worst event in history, but it leads to the power of the resurrection. Jesus then sends the Holy Spirit who forms the church. The church continues to mimic the history of the chosen people by suffering. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, the New Testament narrative is about pain, persecution, imprisonment, and death. Suffering and difficulties continue throughout the biblical narrative. Pain is not an exception in the life of a follower of God but a key characteristic of it.

After the arrival of the Spirit at Pentecost, the church grows numerically (Acts 2). The Spirit of God was manifest in the miraculous healing of a lame man. But as soon as the apostles preach about the plan of God in Scriptures, the persecution begins as Peter and John are arrested (Acts 3, 5). In Acts 6, the followers in the church grew as “the number of disciples multiplied greatly” (v. 7). But when Stephen displayed the power of God, “full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people,” he was accused of blasphemy (Acts 6:8). After preaching about the truth from the Hebrew Scriptures, he is stoned to death (Acts 7). Growth in the kingdom does not protect the followers of God. Instead, the suffering of the people grows as the kingdom of God spreads.

The next scene in the early history of the church introduces Saul (Acts 8). He is a man who “was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men
and women and committed them to prison” (v. 3). The church had no place to find refuge against fear and hate. But preaching of the good news did not end.

The people of God press forward. God steps in and converts Saul on his way to kill followers of Jesus (Acts 9). When it became known that Saul converted, the Jews stood at the gates waiting to kill him (v. 24). The providential powers of the state continued to persecute the new followers of Jesus. King Herod caused major suffering in Acts 12. He killed James, put the apostle Peter in prison, and “laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church” (v. 1). In the midst of the suffering of the church, God gives victories, for He reigns in power. In chapter 12, Peter is miraculously freed from prison by an angel. Herod is judged by God and killed by an angel. It is declared that the “word of God increased and multiplied” (v. 24). God is at work in and through the tribulations of the early church. Yet he allows the death of his servant James. Church tradition states that all the apostles died premature deaths because of their faith except John. But the apostle John was sentenced to a life of exile on the island Patmos. The story of God in the Biblical narrative shows that pain, suffering and death are an integral part of the life of those who follow God. It is not unusual and should therefore be expected.

Confessional Small Groups in the Twenty-first Century

The church today must be a place that trains people to be prepared for pain in their walk with God in light of the biblical testimony. Jesus, our hope and example, suffered and died alone. He did not promise a life different than the one He lived. Jesus promises not health or wealth, but troubles, when He says, “in the world you will have tribulation,” yet He does not leave us in fear but encourages the church to “take heart, I
have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). Therefore, the Church must choose to expect and prepare to live well in troubled times because Jesus reigns and has defeated the powers of darkness.

The enemy has been defeated but not completely put away, as the book of Acts explains. Today the followers of Jesus have to follow the ways of the early church by gathering regularly. Directly after the narrative describing the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church Luke writes, “and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The church gathers to learn and to be a confessional community. There are very few, if any, communities like the early church in Acts. To gather this way means to share life together rather than to meet once or twice a week. They were the definition of intimate: “now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common” (Acts 4:32). The church today may never be able to imitate that type of community, but it can at least strive for its heart.

The church of the twenty-first century must have its eyes on the church of Acts. Dallas Willard comments, “the Life is one that requires some regular and profound conjunction with others who share it. It is greatly diminished when that is lacking.”

The community must embrace both the positive and negative aspects of being a place of confession. The local church needs the truth of the word of God and the truth experienced in their daily lives. Each person needs to be able to confess the words of life found in the

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Bible and have the confidence to share their struggles. The affirmation of one another to do good in word and deed should flow from time spent together. Life is difficult and distractions are plenty. The Church must confess the life prescribed in the Bible and the personal difficulties of falling short. The Christian life is one of victory and struggle. The Church is called to celebrate and to mourn.

The Church also must reflect the truth that it cannot be perfect. Speaking the truth about falling short of the perfect standards found in the Word should be a part of fellowship. Therefore, “confession alone makes deep fellowship possible, and the lack of it explains much of the superficial quality so commonly found in our church associations.”26 Confessing the truth of how the church is to live and where it falls short allows people the freedom to live in the light. Without speaking the truth about pain and celebrating successes, the church will fail to experience the abundant life God desires for His people.

The community needs to be a willing and welcoming place for members to express negativity, pain, and suffering. Struggles should be met with patience, silence, and acceptance that leads to hope. The community may need to guide the person away from sin that has caused pain. The community may need to lead the person into the hands of God who can heal the pain. The community may need to lead the person into the presence of God who in His will, which is a mystery, allows pain or death. Either way the Christian life needs to be lived in community so that the truth can be expressed and

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26 Ibid., 188.
heard. In the truth, a seed of hope may be planted, a miracle could be received, or a new path could be traveled. But in isolation, a believer is easily consumed by the darkness.

God lives in relationship with pain because He has experienced it in *perichoresis*. In a confessional community, God shows people to path to walk through pain. Pain is not to be experienced alone. Speaking the truth about one’s struggles in community breathes life into death. The community can learn from and imitate others who are dealing well with the mystery of what God permits. Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor emeritus of philosophical theology at Yale, wrote an important work titled *Lament for a Son*. His son died at twenty-five years old in a hiking accident. Wolterstorff published the book twelve years after the passing of his son “in the hope that some of those who sit beside us on the mourning bench for children would find my words giving voice to their own honoring and grieving.”

His words have been very helpful in my walk. His story and journey echo the lessons that are core to the ministry. The mission of God is personal and the church must always learn from the personal experiences of each other.

Wolterstorff struggles with the loss of his son. His story is relatable and therefore helpful to others coping with similar tragedies. But he also highlights the uniqueness in the struggle of each person. His son passed quickly compared to my son who had a terminal illness that he fought for thirteen months. Wolterstorff contemplates, “death is the great leveler, so our writers have always told us. Of course they are right. But they have neglected to mention the uniqueness of each death – and the solitude of suffering which accompanies that uniqueness. We say, ‘I know how you are feeling.’ But we

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Struggles unify and connect people in mysterious ways. In a small group or church family, people remember the insensitive comments others have said. They may want to say something but are afraid to add to the pain. What happens to the person under duress is that they are too often left alone because others fear saying the wrong thing.

The dilemma has a solution. It is widely applicable even though the painful circumstances will vary greatly. Wolterstorff suggests, “What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.” The Church needs to hear that they do not have to have answers. Their very presence and prayers are what a troubled person needs.

The wife of the theologian Kelly Kapic, Tabitha, has a rare disorder called erythromelalgia. The disorder, also known as man on fire syndrome, has been raging in her body since 2010. There is no cure and she is constantly affected by its presence. Dr. Kapic wrote a book capturing her story as well as others’ stories in suffering. But he makes his purpose clear that it “is neither autobiographical nor simply to tell powerful stories about individuals who struggle: this book is a theological and pastoral meditation.” The positive expectation is that “all our reflections on God inevitably

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28 Ibid., 25.

29 Ibid., 34.

come with pastoral and very personal implications.”\textsuperscript{31} Therefore his shared stories resonate with my story and the purposes of the ministry.

Kapic has a unique perspective in that he does not experience the physical pain of his wife, but the loss of her health directly affects his well being. He is living and loving his wife in the midst of her pain and their new reality that he cannot change. Kapic adds to the wisdom of being present as a response to suffering. He explains the opportunity to serve as a witness. A person becomes a witness by “acknowledging that our troubles are real and that God is unflinchingly faithful.”\textsuperscript{32} Speaking about the present painful realities has a power in the process of communicating. There is no need to excuse or explain God. The fact is that God is faithful even in the mystery of what He permits. He cautions that “What I need is not for someone to tell me everything is okay; I need them to acknowledge that something is wrong – that I am not insane, but a real problem is at hand. When I see that others believe this, know this, feel this, I can calm down. I have received a witness.”\textsuperscript{33} A person confessing the truth that he or she does not want to believe, like cancer or an incurable illness, is itself a grace.

A person suffering greatly questions his or her own relevance. At the cross God communicates a love far beyond our human understanding that answers the most important question of whether He cares. God cares and loves deeply by His sacrificial love. Wolterstorff knows the love of God and trusts in Him. Yet even with knowing the

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 153.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 154.
love of God, “a new and more disturbing question now arises: Why do you permit
yourself to suffer, O God? If the death of the devout cost you dear (Psalm 116:15), why
do you permit it? Why do you not grasp joy?” 34 There are just some questions that will
go unanswered, but still need to be asked.

God is not distant in the unanswered questions. He cares for a clear reason; He
suffered for love. Wolterstorff explains, “God is not only the God of the sufferers but the
God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart.
Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God.” 35 The loss of his son opened
a view of God that is unique in that loss and void. God could have saved his son but did
not. God could have delivered life but instead permitted death. So the question lingers
“Why isn’t Love-without-suffering the meaning of things? Why is suffering-Love the
meaning? Why does God endure his suffering? Why does he not at once relieve his
agony by relieving ours?” 36 God could have ended the scourging of the whips upon Jesus.
God could have stopped the nails from piecing His feet and hands. The reality of love is
not incompatible with suffering. Pain remains for God’s people today as it did for the
passion of Jesus.

But the people of God have hope, for God conquered death. Pain, misery, and
death do not have the final say. Kapic states, “even as our hearts can be prone to question,
filled with dread and doubt, let us take confidence that our God personally understands

34 Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son, 80.
35 Ibid., 81.
36 Ibid., 90.
us, not hypothetically but concretely in Christ. Jesus wept tears, for in and through his incarnate life he had fully entered into the drama of fallen human experience."\textsuperscript{37} This ministry at BCC brings the love of Christ into the forefront of pain. The church will be equipped to enter the mystery of suffering. Prayer, Scripture, community, and mediation on the cross are means of accessing the grace of God to know His presence in pain.

**Leading through Pain and Suffering**

Church leaders need to be present in lives of their people in celebrations, daily doldrums, and suffering. The weekly rhythms of the church make connections to the daily grind. People generally like to celebrate. But leadership needs to step into suffering especially when there are problems that cannot be easily solved. Christ-like leaders need to acknowledge that answers to the most problematic questions in life are not promised. But the presence of God in all of life is an important gift to bring. Therefore leadership, especially within a small group ministry, needs to see the pain from a different perspective which the person or people directly affected cannot see. Therefore, it is loving and helpful for the church to discern four main categories of suffering. Bringing to light the kind of pain a person is experiencing equips the person and the group to know how to best pray and love.

Not all suffering is alike and God uses each type for different purposes. How a person considers and understands the source of suffering determines what they may take from it. In his book *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, Tim Keller describes

\textsuperscript{37} Kapic, *Embodied Hope*, 91-92.
four types of suffering. Each form has a different source and a different purpose for pain. He uses biblical references for illustrations of each type.

Life does not divide cleanly into categories. Keller recognizes the limitations of defining suffering into different classes. He starts by writing that “the Bible forbids us to use a single template for handling pain and grief, but modern people tend to be more reductionist.”38 Keller avoids simplifying the issues contained in each section. Just as every person and situation is unique, “every affliction, then, is virtually unique. And it means that every sufferer will need to find a somewhat different path through it.”39 The following general categories are a tool to help people who are suffering grasp a place to walk in their specific path.

In the first category, Keller utilizes Jonah and David to describe the kind of suffering “we bring on ourselves.”40 Both Jonah and King David had done things that resulted in certain problems that led to pain. Jonah was obstinate in running away from the call of God to preach to the Assyrians at Nineveh. Jonah suffers through a storm at sea, a three-day stay in the belly of a fish, and sitting in the smoldering sun without shade. Through all his troubles, God sought to teach Jonah about Himself, but Jonah’s rejection led to his own suffering. King David knew he should not covet the wife of another man. But he went through great effort to have her as his own. His lust led to murder. The loss of a baby was part of what God allowed in breaking David to yield his

38 Keller, Walking with God, 206.
39 Ibid., 216.
40 Ibid., 207.
heart. Keller sees God allowing this type of suffering or “brokenness of the world” to enter “our lives to wake us up and turn us to him. The severity of this depends on our heart’s need.” Therefore God uses suffering born out of moral failure to pull a person into a right relationship with Him.

A second type of suffering comes from the attacks of others. Keller illustrates the “suffering of betrayal” through the apostle Paul and Jeremiah. Both of these saints spoke the truth about others’ need to turn to God but were despised and rejected. The ones that they were trying to help turned and hurt them instead. When people are hurt by betrayal, the sufferer will need to apply the forgiveness received by God to forgive the wrongdoer. The issues around how and when to forgive are complex. A person must struggle against bitterness and contempt in living how Paul himself instructed, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32). When a person can forgive the wrong of another, he or she can more deeply love others and God who has forgiven him or her.

The next type of pain is found in loss. No one escapes this kind of suffering, so it is also called universal suffering. The pain is not a consequence of the behavior of anyone. Keller illustrates this form of suffering in Mary and Martha in grieving the loss of Lazarus their brother (Jn 11:1-44). Death will overcome us all until Jesus returns to the final defeat of death in His second coming. Until then all will taste the pain of loss. Keller explains a purpose for this pain is to show how people can grieve. Paul instructs

41 Ibid., 208.
42 Ibid., 209.
followers of Christ not to grieve without hope of a future, but to bear in mind a future that is secure in faith by Jesus (1 Thes 4:13, 2 Cor 16-18).

The last category of suffering Keller identifies is that of “mystery.” He lists examples from Hebrew narratives to the Psalms to the Prophets and the New Testament narrative. He chooses to focus on the story of Job. The suffering of Job was not due his own failings or the failings of others. His pain included the loss of most of his family and possessions but also included his own physical suffering. Job considers whether he needed to repent or if there was a lesson to learn. But in the absence of either, the suffering of Job is a mystery. Keller sees a purpose in this suffering as Job “was being led to the place where he would obey God simply for the sake of who God is, not in order to receive something or to get something done.” Keller does not attempt to make all of mysterious sufferings fit into teaching a person a lesson. Yet he describes the perseverance necessary in continue seeking God regardless of lack of answers, reasons, or lessons.

God reveals Himself as the Creator of the universe. God wields all power and is in sovereign control of His creation. He could have crafted a universe with no pain or sorrow. But instead he uses pain to express Himself to His creation. The reason is a mystery. Jesus, fully God and fully man, is the ultimate example of how to live in the midst pain and sorrow as the perfect expression of God. When the children of God

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43 Ibid., 211.

44 Ibid., 212.
imitate Him in their own sorrows, there is fellowship and connection to God and the Church.
PART THREE

MINISTRY PRACTICE
CHAPTER 4
PREPARATION AND GOALS OF MINISTRY PLAN TO PAIN AND SUFFERING

The goal of the project is to create tools to aid and equip small group leaders to walk through difficult times with members of their groups. Pain and suffering is a part of the life of every believer in some form. The ministry will enable small group leaders to gain confidence in how to minister in love when difficult times arise.

**Creation of Tools**

This project is centered on physical objects and a forty-day devotional. The belief is that the objects will act as reminders to help ground participants in the present needs of their friends. The Scripture-centered devotional helps move them from the present circumstances to a deeper place with God. Both are useful to validate the painful reality and the hope that is real but not necessarily felt.

There were two physical objects to be created and distributed. A cross was created to help the person dealing with suffering to focus on Jesus. A coin was created to help the group focus on the person suffering and their hope of God in prayer.
The cross was carved out of hickory wood, sanded, stained, and painted with a protective coating. A volunteer from the church was recruited who had skills with woodworking and a vision for the project. David Greenwood had been praying for my family as we went through the loss of my son Josiah to brain cancer. Greenwood was familiar with the cross that was created for Josiah to hold during the last two days of his life. Greenwood had lost his wife to cancer about five years before. The cross was recreated by using the original cross used by Josiah as a model (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The crosses are shaped so that they fit in one’s palm with the top three points visible when clutched. The crosses are created to be bigger than something that would fit comfortably in a pocket. The cross fills the palm of an average adult. Twenty crosses were completed before the launch of the project at Burke Community Church. Greenwood purchased the supplies and created the crosses.

The coin was created with design help from the Burke Community Church graphics department and Coins for Anything. It was recreated from a coin originally designed to help the children who prayed for Josiah. The coin was to be used to remember him and help the children and their parents process his death. The metal coin is 1.75 inches in diameter with an antique gold finish. One side is raised metal with no color or clear epoxy (see Figure 3). This side has the phrase “BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS” on the top. The middle is filled with an etched drawing of the head of a lion. The other side is filled with a grey color and epoxy (see Figure 4). This side contains the verse, “A friend loves at all times, a brother is born for the time of adversity” on top with “Proverbs 17:17” at the bottom. In the middle of the coin is a cross. Two
hundred coins were produced at a cost of $6.08 each. A member of the church was recruited to donate the money to cover production.

A forty-day devotional was created to focus the small group on God as the suffering servant (see Appendix A). The devotional was written to be thought provoking, encouraging, and concise. A person going through a painful experience is often not able to think deeply. Suffering limits the ability of a person to become very reflective. Therefore, the devotional has an appropriately short amount of reflection which takes into account the circumstances of the readers. The devotions focus on Christ and His sufferings. There are portions that reflect on the different biblical narratives where God uses the pain of His followers for good. There are portions that reflect on different explanations of sufferings from different epistles. A holistic view from both the New and Old Testaments featuring different genres helps to provide a broad context of God’s use of pain and suffering.

The devotional follows the same outline every day. Each day begins with a Bible verse. The reflection that follows is a meditation on the verse of the day. The last piece is a one-sentence prayer to focus the reader on Jesus.

Before gathering any information for the ministry project, a prescreening consent form was created (see Appendix B). The form included a summary of the project. The text emphasized that the project is not meant to answer all questions associated with pain and suffering. Furthermore, it specified that no children or incarcerated persons are to be a part of the study. A series of warnings about the possible dangers associated with the
study are given. Finally, an affirmation of confidentiality is stated with contact information about answering any questions pertaining to the study.

A presentation for small group leaders to introduce, cast vision, and equip them for the project was created. The title of the presentation was called “Hope for the Hurting.” The main text utilized was 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. The workshop began with the small group leaders giving their own stories and best practices of how they have cared for each other in painful situations. Emphasis was placed on the fact that good fellowship helps people survive, grow, and mature through trials. My personal story of loss from divorce, losing my job, and the loss of my ten-year-old son to cancer was a transition to the material. The vulnerability and transparency demonstrated in sharing my personal story was meant to cast vision for the empowering nature of sharing in a group. The telling of difficult emotional tales builds intimacy within the group that grows a deeper bond and confidence.

In 2 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul describes how the God of all comfort utilizes our afflictions to comfort others who are sharing painful times. As small groups share in the suffering of other members, they are able to share in the comfort of others. The word for comfort in the Greek is repeated ten times in the paragraph. Paul places great emphasis on the importance of comforting one another. The Greek word used by Paul is the same as in Hebrews 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” The word translated as “comfort” ten times in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 is translated in Hebrews 10 as “encouraging.”
Therefore when a small group comforts each other with their stories of difficulties and pain, they are also encouraging each other. The building up and connection that occurs in helping others through their hurt is essential in building the community of Christ that God desires for His people.

The class describes how to comfort utilizing a vision for helping, an intention of doing so, and having a practical method to do so. The workshop teaches on how the small group leaders should comfort the hurting. The group gathering together is the first part of caring. There is a power in the presence of others who care. Praying to the God who can do all things is essential. Praying for a person in the group during the session is as important as praying after the gathering ends. The leaders give their own stories but also give words of encouragement from God’s word. The most essential piece and what is most emphasized is creating a safe place to listen, perhaps cry, and gently point the group back to God.

The project gives the small group leader the tools to accomplish this vision. The workshop describes the wooden cross given to the person suffering to help them focus on Jesus who has also suffered. The coin is explained as a means to remember to pray for the person going through their particular trial. The group is encouraged to commit to put the coin in their pocket every day. Then when the small group member touches the coin, they are to pray for the person who is hurting. Therefore, they will touch the coin and pray for the person at least twice a day when they put the coin in their pocket and when they take it out. God works through the prayers of His people and the hurting person is also comforted knowing that the group is praying often. Lastly, the group is instructed to go
through the devotional. The devotional gives theological comforts for a person going
through pain and suffering. The workshop ends with questions and answers.

Each group also received an introductory lesson plan along with the materials (see
Appendix C). The lesson gives an overview of how the project will work within their
small group. It gives a series of questions followed by relevant Scripture supporting the
discussion. The small group leader is given a key concept that they should communicate
during the discussion. The coin, cross, and devotional are introduced and vision is cast
for their use. The plan ends with a time for questions, answers, and prayer.

The last thing that was created before launching the project was the pre-survey
(see Appendix D). The survey establishes a baseline for the groups to understand their
health and theological understanding of pain and suffering. After the project, the entire
group had an opportunity to share their health and theology in the post-survey (see
Appendix E). Analyzing the before and after data is used to evaluate the project.

**Creation of Timeline**

The project was created over ten months, then implemented and evaluated. The
following is a production schedule for all the pieces of the project. The project required
the creation of the tools, pre-survey, and workshop. There were many parts of the project
that had to be lined up in the right way for proper execution.

I had worked as a pastor of Burke Community Church for nine years before the
curch leadership fired me. The elders and the senior pastor stated they morally and
biblically disapproved of my divorce. They did not believe that Burke Community
Church was the place that I should continue to be a pastor. My last day of employment
was March 31, 2015 but I continue to be an active member of the church. The leadership of the church was supportive of me as an employee completing the doctor of ministry degree. However, after my termination, I needed to gain permission again from leadership before launching the program. Therefore, meetings with the small groups director, the pastor of adult ministries, and the senior pastor were set for December even before the project outline was approved by Fuller Theological Seminary.

There are three main parts of the ministry project that had to be completed before the training of small group leaders. All three began in January. The coin design began with a phone call to Coins for Anything. The original coin design was sent to the church graphic artist and design team for suggestions and edits. It took six weeks and many emails to get the final coin designed. Payment to the production team was sent in March and the coins arrived two weeks later.

The production of the cross began with a meeting with Dave Greenwood. I knew of his expertise and interest in utilizing the cross to help others. I brought him the cross Josiah had and he used it as the model for creating others. He purchased the wood, carved the crosses, sanded, stained, and oiled them. He was able to complete the production of the crosses in four weeks.

The last piece of the project was the devotionals. An email was sent to request the editorial assistance of Candi Dickerson. She had experience with writing and editing theological works. The first draft of devotionals was written in February. The drafts and revisions were completed into a final draft on April 3, 2015. The word documents were
sent to the church graphic department to be printed on 4 by 5.5 inch paper. The final product was finished by April 7 and ready to be delivered to the first small group.

The workshop was set for April 22, 2015. All the materials were made and printed before the meeting. The consent form, introductory lesson, pre-survey, and PowerPoint slides were developed in March. An email was sent to the small group leaders to invite them to the meeting. After the presentation, the small group leaders were given the consent forms with instructions of how to keep them anonymous. A follow up email was sent to all the small group leaders giving them access to the consent form, pre-survey, and introductory lesson.

The program lasted from May through October. Small group leaders gained access to the materials from the small groups director who stored the materials in her office in the church building. An email went out from the director in August reminding them of the program and its purpose.

The final piece was the post-survey as a means of evaluation. The link to the online survey was sent on October 20. The post-survey deadline was set as November 15.

Goals in Ministering to Small Groups

The Help for the Hurting ministry to small groups has a goal of making a significant impact for good during the difficult times of its participants. The objectives are about helping all the participants including the leaders, people in pain, and those in the small group who desire to help those in pain. Everyone who finds him or herself in the path of suffering can mature to Christ-likeness through it.
Too often Christians do not grasp the intentions of God through difficulties. Participants will have an increased understanding of the purposes of God in pain and suffering. They will grow to understand how the love of God is experienced and known during suffering. They will see it is not merely about surviving the pain, but growing from it.

A misconception about pain is that it is always punishment. People wrongly assume that someone has done something wrong and pain is directly or indirectly the result. Participants in the ministry will have an expectation of suffering in their lives as they live for God and His purposes. No one escapes pain, especially people who follow Jesus Christ.

It is difficult if not impossible to understand reasons for pain. Many times the answers to the questions of pain and suffering have no satisfying answers. People in the small group will become more open to God moving in mysterious ways rather than ways people can understand with reason.

Objects have meaning. For example, a smell can bring a memory forward. There is power when entering the home in which one was raised. Participants will experience the role of physical helps in their spiritual lives. Holding the cross will help the person going through pain and suffering shift focus from oneself onto Jesus. The coins will help small group members remember the suffering of others in their daily lives.

The small groups participating in the program will experience a deeper connection of fellowship with others in the group. Pain in and of itself can bring purpose. The difficult times can be a formative glue that binds the group together. Where the
enemy of the saints desires destruction and devastation from suffering, God will use it to weave a tighter bond within the community.

A person can easily become myopic in prayer. The prayers sent to the Father are requests revolving around personal experiences and concerns. Through the time participating in the ministry, people will incorporate praying for others into their routines. They will pray not only about what is affecting them but also how God may bring change to the lives of others.

The ministry to Burke Community Church small groups took specific actions to become an effective tool within the group. The physical objects that anchored the ministry had to be created and produced to hand out before needs came forth. A forty-day devotional was written to equip people with a better understanding of who God is and what He is doing. Certain events had to be scheduled in a certain order to make sure the ministry could be tried and evaluated within the time constraints of the program. Specific achievable goals had to be created to test the value of the ministry.
CHAPTER 5

IMPLEMENTATION REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF MINISTRY PLAN

This chapter will review the successes of and adjustments required from implementing the ministry plan to the small groups at Burke Community Church. Pre and post-surveys will be reported and interpreted so that correct evaluations can be made. The lessons learned will be applied so that the ministry can evolve into a better instrument for God to use to equip His people for ministry to hurting people.

Tools Used for Evaluating Ministry Strategy

The main tools used to evaluate the ministry were the pre-survey, post-survey, and interview with the director of small groups. The survey was distributed in an email to the ministry participants. The email contained a link to the online survey. Survey Monkey provided the format to host the surveys and collect the results. Lastly the interview was conducted in a one-on-one conversation with the leader of small groups.

The pre-survey was used to gain insight into the beliefs and spiritual habits of the group. The following are seven questions and the specific answers. The participants were asked to mark the response that best represents their understanding. The following was
the range of answers: I do not agree, I somewhat disagree, I agree and disagree, I somewhat agree, and I agree. The results will be in parentheses following the question.

The first question asked whether the participants felt that they understood the purposes of God in pain and suffering. The group showed an affirmative answer (somewhat disagree 1, agree and disagree 2, somewhat agree 9, agree 8). The second question asked whether pain can be caused by something other personal sin. They were very positive affirming the point (somewhat agree 3, agree 14). The third question asked about their expectations of personal pain. The group was very affirming of the expectation of pain entering their lives (agree and disagree 1, somewhat agree 3, agree 17). The fourth question was about God working in mysterious ways rather than ways they can reasonably understand. The group believed they were accepting of God working in ways they do not understand, but not as sure as they were in question three (agree and disagree 2, somewhat agree 7, agree 12). The fifth question was about whether the group found that physical objects help in their spiritual life. The group was somewhat warm to the idea but by far the least of all the previous questions (do not agree 2, I somewhat disagree 2, I agree and disagree 5, I somewhat agree 8, I agree 4). The sixth question asked if they had a good connection with their group. Overall, the answers were very positive (somewhat agree 3, agree 18). The last question was about their prayer life. Most of the group incorporated praying for others in their daily prayer life (agree and disagree 1, somewhat agree 5, agree 15). The group as a whole had a very mature view of themselves and their small group.
The next two questions were optional and had no word limitations. They were asked to describe a positive experience they had had with a small group when they went through a difficult time. There were fourteen positive responses including phrases such as “unity and depth of connection,” “my small group has been extremely supportive, non judgmental and encouraging,” “opportunity to share and hear about others who have suffered,” “prayer support,” “happy that folks cared about my welfare and prayed for me,” and “being enveloped in a cocoon of believers to pray, empathize, strengthen, mourn, rejoice, and walk beside made a lonely and painful season bearable.” There were some that described specific situations where the group had helped previously such as “when my father died, the group was very good in consoling our family and being a part of the funeral service from afar.” Another person described strife in the family: “my divorce and the loss of my mother. My small group at the time was two godly men, one my age and the other much younger. Having their Biblical counsel, their encouragement, and their willingness to listen and share time with me made an impossible time sweet as I look back. Praise God for them!” One person shared how the group joined in supporting their “daughter not living a Christian life. This group help us through that and now she is attending small group with us.” Two people shared how their group helped them through financial struggles: “we went through a time of financial difficulty and everyone in the group was very supportive, encouraging and generous to us” and “when we went through a rough time with our business and our home people are very encouraging and loving and helpful.” The common themes were connecting and prayer such as “having people pray over me. Whatever I was feeling inside was put to peace” and how “the small group gave
a relationship with one individual that I felt same to open up to. This in turn helped so much to be able to trust God and to open up more in the group.” Overall the groups were already close which reflected positively in part one of the survey.

The group was then asked to describe a negative experience they had had with a small group as they endured a difficult time. There were seven comments explaining that they had had no negative experiences. Only seven people made comments describing a negative experience. It was good that the some of the participants were willing to admit their experiences were not perfect. A few people noted general complaints like “conflict in the solutions,” “feeling that issue was superficially treated,” and a “prayer request not taken seriously by the leader.” A person discussed a family member who was attracted to the same gender and “one person in my group made me feel ignorant for not knowing more Bible verses and also told me my daughter was going to hell for being gay.” One man struggled in his marriage and his group of friends made it more difficult:

Again, through my divorce. I was divorcing because my ex-wife wanted me to convert to Islam. I wanted to prove my value and self-esteem by sleeping around. However, this was incongruous with professing to be a Christian and refusing to convert to Islam. Yet, my mother (Catholic-non-practicing at the time) and my best friend (Mormon) pressured me to move on before God had given me the go ahead. These well meaning family and friends made my burden far greater.

Another person described a group in which it did not seem safe to share: “I've seen people put down others. They weren't in our group but there's been some judgment.” A person was in a group that had a “conflict with a group member. It did not end well although we now see some mending.” Most of the negative stories had to do with conflicts within the groups. Even with the problems chronied above, the group had a very positive view of small groups overall.
Online Survey Completed After Six Months

The post-survey was sent to the small groups of Burke Community Church after the allotted time for participation in the project. There were twelve people who participated in the post-survey. The survey repeated the first seven questions from the pre-survey to allow for direct comparison. There was a multiple-choice section to evaluate their experience with the project. Finally there was space to give reactions and suggestions at the end of the survey.

The first part of the survey is about their expectations of God and suffering. The results will be in parentheses following with the question. Per having a good grasp of the purpose of God through pain, the group was positive (somewhat disagree 1, agree and disagree 3, somewhat agree 17, agree 11). Overall there was a slight proportional shift towards more agreement than before the survey. The second question about their biblical knowledge of God using pain was another slight shift toward more affirming (agree and disagree 2, somewhat agree 3, agree 27). The third question with expecting pain and suffering to arise stayed relatively the same as before (do not agree 1, somewhat disagree 2, somewhat agree 3, agree 26). Both times the group was very positive. Question four was a slight shift toward more affirming about the mysterious ways that God works (somewhat disagree, agree and disagree 2, somewhat agree 15, agree 14). Physical objects as tools to help their spiritual life found moderate growth (do not agree 4, somewhat disagree 4, agree and disagree 8, somewhat agree 8, agree 8). The coins and crosses had only a slight increase proportionately on this matter. The sixth question about connection in the small groups was about the same as the pre-survey (do not agree 1,
agree and disagree 2, somewhat agree 3, agree 26). Lastly, there was not a significant change between surveys pertaining to the question about praying for others (do not agree 1, agree and disagree 4, somewhat agree 6, agree 21). Therefore, there was no large differential between pre-survey and post-survey. The biggest shift was from their perspectives of God at work through pain and suffering.

The multiple-choice questions were followed by two optional questions. Both questions were about descriptions pertaining to their previous experiences in small groups. The first section asked participants to describe a positive experience with a small group during a difficult time. Five people wrote about the importance of prayer in their group: “their support and prayers,” “prayer with devotion,” “prayer,” “the group being together and praying together made me feel at peace and not alone,” and specifically that “my group continued to pray for a close family member that was contemplating suicide. It gave me comfort that the group included my concern in their daily prayer time.” Others described how the group was a safe place to discuss struggles: “the ability to discuss things with people that will support you and not just give advice,” “even though there are 2 or more weeks between meetings, someone always remembered what I was struggling with and asked me about it,” “the shared experiences as we open up and tell our stories,” and “I was able to share family relationship issues with our small group that I would not have felt comfortable sharing elsewhere.” People described how their group was a place to gain strength: “emotional and spiritual support. Knowing that people are praying for you as you suffer through a difficult time makes the suffering more bearable. Meals, prayers, texts, notes are helpful beyond measure,” “healing a lost friendship,” “not
necessarily limited to our group, but when my wife had surgery several people brought food over to aid in me caring for the family somewhat singlehandedly,” and “the birth of our children.” People described how their small group provided them with a sense of mission, writing that they had a “feeling of being part of something larger than myself and strong in that aspect of faith” and enjoyed “serving the homeless together.” Lastly, one person describes how important small group to her walk with God by “being able to share what is going on with others, praying together but mostly what has changed me feelings is when we all worship together. This has been a mystery to me. Every time I have felt bad and went to life group and we worshiped together my heart and countenance has changed big time. All my problems fall away as peace washes over me.” Small groups have had a very positive overall effect in the lives of the participants.

The next question asked participants to describe a negative experience with a small group during a trial or painful event. Some people listed a particular situation they went through: “memories with stroke,” “conflict in the group,” “loss of loved one,” and “my sister died from cancer at age 23.” Others described particular struggles within the small group such as “communication -- often default to share things as intimate as what causes pain and suffering in one's life,” “I am not comfortable sharing my thoughts within the small group because there is an expectation to view the Pastor as the ultimate authority. Additionally I don't have much in common with the majority of members,” “being misunderstood and of my motivation for sharing,” “people who offer assistance/help but don't follow through,” and “in some small groups, sharing raw doubts and negative emotions about God result in an overly dismayed or aghast response, with
the indirect message: you should not express the doubts or feelings, even if you have them.” Finally someone shared an experience that sums up the risk of sharing difficult things in a small group, as “it is the fastest way to ensure discussions stay at a surface/didactic pat/we should always be happy and we should have all the answers level. Other groups respond with listening, and presence, and compassion, and give room for the spectrum of emotion and belief as we journey together -with acceptance, love and patience.” The narrative information qualified the very positive responses about their experience in small groups from parts one and two.

The next part contained questions that dealt with particular elements of the project. The answers will be in brackets following with the question. The first question pertained to the usefulness of the carved cross (do not agree 2, somewhat disagree 2, somewhat agree 2, agree 5, not applicable 15). The majority of the answers were from those who did not use the cross since it was only for the person in the group that was struggling. Most of the people found it helpful, but not everyone did. The next question was about the coin being helpful during the program (I do not agree 2, somewhat disagree 3, agree and disagree 5, I agree 4, not applicable 12). The coin was not as well received as the cross with most being ambivalent about its usefulness. The next question asked about the usefulness of the devotionals (I do not agree 1, somewhat disagree 1, agree and disagree 1, somewhat agree 2, agree 9, not applicable 12). It was considered the most helpful of all the tools. The fourth question was about the small group leader being equipped to lead (do not agree 1, agree and disagree 1, somewhat agree 3, agree 6, not applicable 15). The leaders felt positively about their own preparedness to lead the
program. The next question asked if the small group participant felt equipped to partake in the project (do not agree. 1, agree and disagree 1, somewhat agree 3, agree 10, not applicable 10). The participants were prepared to engage in the project. The last multiple-choice question asked if they would recommend the project to a person going through a difficult situation (do not agree 1, agree and disagree 2, somewhat agree 1, agree 8, not applicable 13). The participating group stated that it would encourage others to go through the process.

The last question in the post-survey asked for suggestions for improving the project. Instructions were to share any suggestions they might have to creating a better experience with the program. They were asked to write about the introductory lesson, the cross, the coins, the devotionals, or any other part of the process. One person noted how more people could be involved and suggested that “maybe advertise effort in church bulletins and through church aid efforts (ministries to those in pain).” A couple of people commended the devotionals, writing “good devotional - not sure the coin helped very much” and “I really enjoyed the devotionals. I would concentrate on those.” One person noted their struggle to engage with the materials and commented about their effectiveness:

This did not work well for me with all that I have on my plate. I did not even read the devotional I am ashamed to say. The coin helped in the beginning to pray. Group members asking and checking up on participation helped in the beginning but that also diminished and my activity with it also as life simply took its course. I personally went through my own time of hardship and came through it with the Lord alone and He changed my life. I do think that this program would have been beneficial if I had been able to participate in it better and if the group also participated together better. There is nothing like holy peer pressure to get one motivated to do the right thing so long as it is done in love and Grace towards one another.
Another person commented positively on all three tools in Help for the Hurting:

Don't know if it's possible, but maybe a daily email containing the devotional (in addition to the book) might be helpful to some. The coins were so helpful to me and reminded me repeatedly throughout the day to pray for many things, not just the one person who was hurting. That person was always in the forefront of each quick prayer, but I'd often add to it. The coins brought ME comfort and brought a reminder that WE do play a role in others' suffering. The cross that we shared with the member going through the cancer was beautiful.

Lastly, one person commented on the small group training, which is the only time I mentioned my divorce throughout the project. The person recommended that I “take some of the blame the next time you tell your story and not put the full blame on your ex-wife.” This participant also put “do not agree” on all answers to questions in part four.

Therefore, the training greatly affected how they viewed the entire program.

**Interview with Small Group Director**

Ramona Waltemeyer is the small group director at Burke Community Church.

She has worked with small groups for six years and full time for the last two years.

Waltemeyer was the main contact for small group leaders throughout the project.

The following questions relate to her knowledge of the small group program and the church experience as a whole at Burke Community Church. When asked how the project fit into her small group program at BCC, she responded, “This project provided leaders with means to specifically address the topics of suffering and pain while providing a practical tools for providing support and encouragement to a group member. It also provides a means for group members to ‘do something’ to support someone in a
difficult situation.” She was then asked what she learned about the leaders or small groups:

There is a level of discomfort in addressing a group member’s suffering, especially if it is associated with a formal study. It can be uncomfortable to present the cross, coins and devotional as a way to support an individual and then ask to allow that information to be included in a study/research project with the expectation of filling out questionnaires and consent forms. There is also a tendency to keep situations within the group rather than reach out to ask for assistance. People often want to keep situations confidential and close rather than allowing it to become ‘public’ by asking for these tools.

Waltemeyer noted that privacy concerns and the sensitivity of sharing in a public setting were part of having “minimal participation” from the groups. She commented on the ease of use of the materials by the groups and getting the materials to them. But leaders expressed uncertainty “as to the type of situation appropriate for the use of these tools.”

She was asked for suggestions on making the equipping leader workshop. The leaders felt they were equipped for the study in general. Waltemeyer suggested to

Include examples of types of situations in which these tools may be helpful. Provide suggestions for leaders to present the program to their life groups – talk about the topic of suffering (ie, talk privately with the individual first, then present to the group; how to support a group member without that becoming the central or only focus of a group).

She was asked about recommending any changes to the coins, crosses, or devotionals:

Include in the devotional some of the personal background and history on the reason this program was put together. While the devotional is meant to be personal rather than a group study, it may be beneficial to have some guide group discussion questions. There is a disconnect between this as a group tool yet done individually.

Waltemeyer noted that she was grateful to address the issue of pain and suffering in the small groups. The topic is always difficult to address, and it can be challenging to care for people in the midst of their problems.
Evaluation of Effectiveness of Ministry

Overall Help for the Hurting was a success. It is a ministry that moves people forward in times of difficulty. Specific progress is hard to measure, but any help is better than avoiding the hurt. Equipping small groups with right theology and physical tools encourages people to grow in the Word of God, prayer, and more intimate fellowship.

The most difficult part of the program arose when the group was going to be studied and evaluated as they were going through a difficult time. One of the small group leaders who could not participate wrote, “the hardest thing was getting our life group to turn in the initial paperwork whether handed to them or emailed. And then we just have poor attendance, so that made it difficult to follow up or get people to sign the paperwork to start the program.” Evaluating people already experiencing difficulty was hard.

The small group leader meeting to equip the leaders was well received. Comments made to both the small group coordinator and myself were positive and encouraging. But the comment made in the evaluation about the explanation of my divorce was difficult to receive. The inability to go into details precludes a discussion of the excruciating pain that I endured, and therefore, I will avoid sharing about it in the next equipping meeting. The mention of losing a marriage, a job, and my oldest son being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer in a three-month span of time should be sufficient. At the end of the program, I will add a list of possible situations where the program could be used.

There will be more writing about the topic since the devotional was well received. One change will be to write a longer introduction to the material. Writing a curriculum
for studying deeper about pain in suffering is another possibility. The short term focus will be on writing about the specifics about my family’s experience with cancer and losing a son.

To evaluate the impact of the program, I will consider the goals stated from before the project. An overall goal is that a group going through the project would be better prepared to help a person in need. The project focused on the entire group dynamics and not simply action steps to help fix a certain problem.

Too often Christians do not grasp the intentions of God through difficulties. Participants had a slight increase in understanding the purposes of God in pain and suffering. Participants in the ministry had an expectation of suffering in their lives as they live for God and His purposes.

People in the small group grew a little more open to God moving in mysterious ways. Participants experienced physical objects as aids in their spiritual lives. The cross being held to help focus the person on Jesus was well received. The coin members carried helped some but not others. The small groups that participated in the program continued to experience a deep connection of fellowship with others in the group. A large part of their connection with each other was and continued to be prayer. The groups that participated were healthy groups. They continued to grow throughout the program.

The Help for the Hurting ministry to small groups made a positive impact during the painful seasons. Everyone in the group including the leaders, people in pain, and those in the small group who desired to help those in pain were addressed throughout the project. The ministry was helpful during difficult times in the participants’ lives.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Hope for the Hurting project was a limited success. It was difficult to engage people to participate in a study about pain and suffering. The small groups at Burke Community Church were helped during the trial period. The tools and training can be made even better with some minor changes.

Changes to Make Based on Lessons Learned

There are no major changes necessary to the project. It was well received and recommended by the trial group to others. But each part of the project has areas that need minor changes. From the promotion to the final reflection, each piece has room to improve.

There should be a clearer and broader message to better promote the ministry. A summary tag line such as “Hope for the Hurting: Being There When it Counts” would help cast vision for mission of the ministry. The feedback from the group was that it had broader potential for other ministries in the church. Promoting to the church at large would raise awareness that the church is actively preparing people to help others when times of difficulty arrive. Some people did not like the extra focus that the current project put on them or others. Promoting the project to prepare people for the times when they are needed is better than during a current crisis. The church would go through the program before a need would arise. Therefore, the church would be better prepared to experience and walk through a difficult time with someone.

The materials for training need to be adjusted for a broader audience. The introduction included my divorce, loss of job, and loss of my son. The divorce and job
loss will be deleted so not to distract the participants. The story is very difficult even just with the loss of a child, therefore they may be less overwhelmed or distracted by the issues surrounding my divorce and job termination. Opening the participation to other church ministries requires stories that include connections other than through small groups. Burke Community Church has a small group component in its men’s and women’s ministries. Highlighting connections and successes in those ministries are necessary to cast vision for the power of fellowship when people engage in community. Life groups have a higher chance to be more intimate than other ministries. But there are still sound connections in each of the ministries in the church.

The coins were created mainly as a reminder for others in the group to pray throughout the week for the person going through a difficult time. The lukewarm evaluations about the helpfulness of the coins do not merit the high cost to produce them. Reminders are very important for those with busy lives. Figuring out another method of reminding group members to pray is important to include in the project.

The cross was well received by the participants. The cross is meant to be clutched in the palm of the person going through some type of pain or suffering. It would be better to have different sizes of crosses to better fit the varying hand sizes of the participants.

According to the surveys, the devotionals had the best impact of all the tools. Revising and editing the current devotionals in light of lessons learned in the writing of the project is necessary. Reading, rewriting, and possibly adding new insights gained from the theological reflections of chapter three would deepen the devotionals.
Lastly, a group guide needs to be added. The director of small groups noted that the devotionals began in the group but the leaders had no guidance about following up in between the forty days. Either a few follow up discussion questions could be added each week or a longer study created out of the theological reflections in chapter three. Further support for the small group leader during the forty days needs to be addressed.

**Next Steps for the Future in Burke Community Church**

For the ministry project to continue, adjustments and additions must be made. Some of the changes can happen quickly. Others will take coordination and creativity. But the church will continue to use the ministry in the meantime.

The promotion of the project needs to begin first. It will take a lot of time to coordinate with the pastors and directors to get their input. The discussion about why and how to broaden the scope of the project will happen primarily with the small groups director, adult generation pastor, and the executive pastor. They will all have a voice in how it is promoted, including creating a tag line to summarize the vision. Creating the tag line will make them feel more invested in the ministry. Once they approve the changes with small groups and ministries, then the work will be done to make it more appropriate for a larger church audience.

Changes to the three primary tools should be the second step. There are currently enough of the tools to allow about six months to make the changes without effecting the ongoing small group usage. A discussion about the coins will be had with the small groups director and the executive pastor. The design team is under the direct supervision of the executive pastor and he has a very creative mind. A new vehicle for helping people
remember to pray will be brainstormed. Ideas may include coins, small crosses, and business cards. The production of more crosses will be discussed as well. Getting permission to communicate with the leadership of men’s ministry to make them will be sought. A production stream for the reminders, crosses, and devotionals will be needed to insure the ministry can meet increased demand. The devotionals would be reviewed for content and possible additions. Funding for any additional costs will be discussed with the adult generations pastor.

A more detailed study about pain and suffering will be written. The small group director encouraged a study to be created for groups to go deeper before an issue arises in a group. The study could be taught in Sunday morning equipping class, a women’s class, and a men’s class, which are the three main vehicles for adult education at Burke Community Church. The teaching would better prepare people for the troubles in life that will come. In addition, the project would be introduced as a means by which the church helps people overcome hardships.

The current training presentation will be changed to reflect the appropriate audience. The group would include ministry leaders and teachers. The focus will remain on community and the need for fellowship to live through and grow from pain and suffering. Any changes in the tools used would be reflected in the presentation as well. The core of the presentation will not change, but be adjusted to accommodate a broader audience.

A personal recollection and reflection from the final months with my son will be put into a readable format, either book or electronic document. Many people have asked
me directly to publish the online medical journal entries I wrote during his fight with cancer. Publishing more information about my struggles and faith through his fight with cancer will help build a bridge to the ministry. I have not worked at the church since 2015, so people new to the church do not know the background of the ministry. It is important for people who consider utilizing the ministry to understand that I as its creator have struggled with pain in my own life.

**Recommendations for Hope for the Hurting in the Church**

Pain and suffering are a part of life. Pain will be experienced no matter how much a person wants to avoid it. The church should be a bright light to those suffering in the darkness. But it is difficult to know what to do or to say during crisis.

Hope for the Hurting gives the church tools to help as the community deals with the inevitable pain that permeates through life. It is not an all-encompassing ministry. It does not try to solve all the problems of pain. There is no ministry capable of solving the myriad of problems found in a community. But Hope for the Hurting equips the church to step forward and be a part of the journey alongside those who suffer.

Engaging people during troubled times can make a profound impact. It is important that the church equips and prepares people for that opportunity. The church will make an impact whether it is positive or negative. People rightfully look to God and His people for help in trying times. The Church must step up to speak clearly of hope in the darkness. Church leadership must be equipping the body to respond in a grace-filled, gospel-centered, God-glorifying way. Help for the Hurting is one tool to accomplish this mission.
The Church must be about reconciling the Bible with the reality of pain. The heroes of the faith are flawed, hurting, and desperate people. The good news of the Bible is not how great the people of God are but how amazing the God of His people is. The gospel of Jesus Christ is more than deliverance from sin or judgment. The good news is the King has come and He is active in our lives. He has saved His people from sin, but He does not spare His people from all pain and sorrows. The King Himself suffered and grieved. The central symbol for the kingdom is the cross, which is the very instrument of the ultimate pain and suffering He endured.

Hope for the Hurting in a small group elevates the voices that can speak of knowing God in and through the suffering of life. People are neither avoided nor given unwanted attention. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls the poor in spirit, meek, and mourning blessed. The Church will do well to learn from those who are so blessed.

Adding the story of my son will be very painful and difficult. The addition to Hope for the Hurting will allow it to join the greater voice of the Church. The writing of others who have suffered and are suffering is important for the Church to truly thrive.

Pain cannot be avoided. Life has pain woven into it from the first breath. Childbirth is painful and traumatic for woman and child. There is currently no life outside of the experience of suffering. Pain is a part of the process. Therefore, the community of believers must figure out how to thrive in the midst of pain.

Isolation is a natural reflex to experiencing pain and suffering. One’s initial reaction to pain may be to retreat and run from community. But life is found in the context of a group and not in isolation. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the presence of God
in the world today. God is present in both joy and pain. There will be a day that sorrow will end, but present living includes troubled times. The gospel is not the absence of the cross but rather Jesus being present as each person bears the cross. God has mysterious purposes in pain and suffering that are often hard if not impossible to discern. But one reason for trouble is for His people to unite with Him in tears of both joy and suffering.
APPENDIX A

Forty-Day Devotional

1. Remember the Light

Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path. (Psalm 119:105)

Pain engulfs us in waves of darkness. Pain is no friend, no matter how familiar we are to its presence. As the length, depth, and difficulties of the darkness take us down, God is with us. His Word tells us there is no place, no circumstance that can separate us from our Father.

Yet in our sorrow and loss, pain takes us into a dark place where God seems absent. We think that He is nowhere near because if He were present, then He would have kept us from this place. Despair is too close. We can taste what is not right. How can God be near in this cold and lonely place?

The temptation to settle in the darkness is real. When we doubt the presence of God, we can easily fall into the trap of living in the ways of the dark. But settling in the darkness will only lead us to deeper darkness and confusion. We must continue to seek the God of the light.

He is here. He is near. So as you walk in these shadows, look for His face. Speak into His ear. Speak His words. Declare the Word of God, especially when you believe He will never hear you. Know that He is near, though He may be silent.

His silence is not His absence. The feeling of loneliness, though real, is a lie. You may not see His face in the dark, but He is closer than ever. He may not speak to you in the noise of the night, but He has spoken. Hear what He has said. What has been true before is still true now. He loves you. He is with you. He will never forsake you.

How do you know? “It is written.” Hold on to the light of His word, now more than ever. Read what He has said. Remember how He has shown you His love in the past. Remember how He has promised His forever love. When pain brings us to darkness, we must turn and trust the light of His Word. He has spoken and we can hear Him, even if we cannot see Him.

Jesus, give us ears to hear Your truth to light our way this very day.

2. Carry the Cross

And He said to all, “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23)
What if pain and suffering was not a barrier to following Jesus, but an expectation? What if God’s plan for us is that we should all feel what we never want to feel? What if we can only know God’s pleasure after we walk with Him through pain?

The Cross is the central metaphor to describe the life Jesus taught His followers to live. The Cross is primarily a tool of suffering; therefore, pain is part of the path. We have triumphs and great joys. Our Father blesses us beyond what we deserve or can comprehend. But that does not mean we will not experience pain. On the contrary, we can be most assured we are on His path when we experience what He Himself experienced: loss.

Why do we follow Him in the Cross Way? It is no popular path. Those who first heard His invitation to bear their own crosses wondered why themselves: “It was a hard saying and many left Him.” We are tempted to leave His way precisely when we are in the middle of His will, in the middle of the pain.

The pain and hurt we have now is our cross to bear. We pick it up and follow Him. We raise it above our heads, that very thing which we despise and want to hide.

We must look to Jesus. He bears His Cross. He bears the shame of death in pain and suffering. In our own pain and suffering, we can now see His face, His truth, and His life in a new way that we never want to forget.

Jesus never said His way was easy or pleasant. Quite the opposite, He said it was difficult, even impossible at times. Yet in our difficulties, He empowers us to do what we could never do. He gives us His grace to overcome what would tear us apart. Follow the Man pulling His cross as He shows you how to carry yours.

*Jesus, may we come to know Your cross as we are called to carry our own.*

3. Jesus Suffers With Us

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46)

Can we hear the cry of Jesus? Do we feel His frustration, loneliness, and pain? His heart is devastated from the inside out. It seems like God has turned His back on Him. There is no deliverance for the Son of God. Through the Cross, Jesus now suffers with us. He cries with us.

Why are we here? Why is this happening? Why has God not delivered us? God may not answer us now. We may never know the answers to our most important questions. But
we do know that the God of the universe, the One Who has the power to do all things, loves us. He loves us enough to die for us.

Yet the pain is real. It is happening to the ones God loves. How can this be? We need to remember Jesus on the Cross, remember what He has done, and remember the path He has taken. The path of love is a path of pain. We are not alone in our pain and suffering. We are joining all of history, as His followers have always followed in His pain-filled path.

While we walk in dark days, we can know that we are not alone. Our pain is unique to us in our place, in our time, and in our distinct story. So this is our sacrifice. Some day we might know the answers to our questions, even if it might be on the other side of life. Until then, may we remember His sacrifice because it is the love of God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit that we see clearest in the suffering on the Cross.

Let us offer our sufferings as an offering together in honor of Him who loved us so. He was forsaken so that we would never be.

Jesus, thank You for loving us so and teaching us the cost of love.

4. Praise God in the Loneliness

“My God, I cry by day, but You do not answer, by night, yet I have no rest. But You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.” (Psalm 22:1-2)

The last words of Christ are the most painful words of all time. His last words come at the time when the Infinite, Eternal Community was torn asunder. But the words Jesus uttered were not unique to Him. He quoted Jewish song lyrics.

The Psalms were the songbook of God’s chosen people. The Psalms were sung to lead God’s people in worship of Him. Different authors wrote these lyrics, some despondent and some cheerful. The Psalms represent different times, places, and situations. But all of the Psalms were written to bring people together to worship the one true God.

Psalm 22 describes someone who is completely undone. The author of this song, David, cries out for deliverance from destruction. We know God delivered David and made him a great king through many different trials. But when Jesus says David’s words, they speak in a situation when the Father did not honor the reasonable, right request of His Son. Jesus died. In the lowest point possible, when all of the sin of everyone who has or will ever live on Planet Earth is resting on Jesus’ shoulders, and when His Father looks away from Him because He becomes that sin so that we can become right with God, Jesus lifts up our eyes.
In His last breaths, Jesus, in unimaginable pain and anguish, screams out a song of worship. He calls out to God who has turned away from His one and only Son. In the midst of rejection and despair, Jesus leads us to worship the very One who seems to have abandoned us. He leads us by example to worship the One who left. God gives us all life from Jesus’ darkest moment.

So what place is too dark for Him? What task too difficult for Him? What pain is too excruciating for Him to fathom? In Him, there is always hope. He alone is worthy of our trust and our worship.

*Jesus, let us honor You with an honest voice of praise in the midst of our darkest times.*

5. **Friends Are Not Optional**

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.  
*(Proverbs 17:17)*

We all need friends. At every age, in every season of life, we need friends. Friends make the good times better and the tough times endurable. Friends and family are especially equipped to help us better navigate all of life.

During difficult and painful times, we feel a pull towards isolation. We feel like we need to contain the damage. We want to keep the carnage to ourselves so that it cannot hurt other people. But when we isolate ourselves, we are then most vulnerable to other pains and hurt which will take us to deeper, darker places.

We are made in the image of God. He Himself is three Persons and one Essence. He is community in unity. To best reflect His image, fulfill our purposes, and to be whole, we need to be in community, especially when fighting pain and suffering.

A true friend is a friend in all seasons. We need a community who can celebrate the joys of life—big things like graduations, promotions, and weddings—and also share in the doldrums when life may seem to just be passing us by. We need a community with whom we can diffuse the burden of rejections, disappointments, and poor health.

The beauty of the Church of Jesus Christ is that we are family. We are brothers and sisters who are created for unique caring. Brothers and sisters are made for times when everyone else may run. We, the Church, are specifically formed to pray, nurture, and care for one another, especially in these times of suffering. The healing of one’s innermost self comes directly with the love of friends and family. Open up and let us in.

*Jesus, may we make room to love and be loved.*

6. **Joshua Is No Moses**
This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:8-9)

If we live long enough, we find out the many ways in which we had no idea how difficult life really is when we were young. Life requires strength and courage which we do not naturally possess. We are often reminded that life is not fair. The way things are is not the way things are supposed to be. Life will ask for more than we are ready or able to give. It is tougher than we want it to be, so we have to remember to be strong and courageous.

When Moses died, Israel, the nation without a land, grieved. They fought despair. The mission God gave them was to live in the land God promised to them. Who told them this mission and promise? Moses. Who recorded this family’s history? Moses. Who wrote down God’s law of life for His people? Who lead them through their wandering in the wilderness? Who knew the way to the Promised Land because God had told him? Moses.

But Moses died before Israel reached the Promised Land, before they completed God’s mission for them. God was faithful and gave them a new leader. Old man Joshua had been with Moses, serving as his second-in-command, all those years. But Joshua was not Moses.

In the ensuing times of mourning, confusion, and change, God gave His peace to His people through their new leader Joshua. Joshua had been at the edge of this Promised Land before. He and Caleb had testified about the great fruits in the Promised Land, but God’s people would not follow Moses’ leading because they had heard about the giants in the land. Joshua had followed Moses as God’s people endured 40 years of strife and waiting. Now Joshua was here again, at the edge of the Promised Land, listening to God’s instructions and leading God’s people, walking into uncertain circumstances following their faithful God.

As we stand on the edge of success or failure, what does God say? What do we hear? “Be strong and courageous.” The facts are not in our favor, but God is. The road ahead is unknown, but God’s ways are written down for us. When we follow what He has written and obey what He says, He shows us the way. Let us remember His promises and character. He was with us before, and He is faithful. Let’s take our eyes off of ourselves and fix our eyes on Him. Let’s remember His words, and rest the future in His hands.

*Jesus, give us the strength and courage to take on new ground today.*

7. **The Call of the Crucified**
I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

When we accept Jesus’ gift of eternal life, we are nailed to the Cross with Christ. Our shame is plastered on the Cross. Our pride is soaked in the grain of its wood. Our filthy deeds are displayed in utter disgust next to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Our nastiness hangs with Him, dead on the Cross of Calvary.

Now the “I” who was is no longer the “I” who is. Our former selves have no power over us because they cannot leave the Cross. We are no longer identified in our sins because Christ paid the cost for us to live in Him.

As we now live, today, Christ lives in us. The power that delivered us from death, destruction, and desolation strengthens us for what lies ahead. The earthly bodies He has given us will be replaced with new ones, reformed and resurrected bodies, perfect and whole. Our bodies will no longer be tainted with death but will be gleaming with eternal life. We wait for that Resurrection Day by faith.

Let us trust Him with what He has done and what He has promised to do. He still loves us. He has given us His Holy Spirit to strengthen us for this time of struggle. He continues to use us for His glory and His purposes. We are purchased by an inconceivably high price: His love shown to us by His sufferings on the Cross. He does not leave us in our sufferings; He moves us onward. Praise be to God.

Jesus, we praise You as You have paid it all so that we might live.

8. When Questions Are Our Answers

“Who is this that obscures My plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell Me, if you understand.” (Job 38:2-4)

Job is considered the oldest writings in the Hebrew Scriptures. Throughout time, we have wondered about the power and goodness of God in the midst of a world filled with pain. The tragedies suffered by Job set the stage for us to reflect on our own problems.

From the outset we see that God hears the accusations of the ancient accuser. Our enemy believes the only reason that Job follows God is because God blesses him. God allows the adversary to destroy Job’s possessions and children. But we see that Job stands fast: “In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing” (Job 1:21).

Satan is not satisfied. He believes Job has not left God because he still has good health. God allows a serious skin ailment to attack Job’s body, but He will not let the enemy take
Job’s life. We read throughout the rest of the book how Job struggles with his losses, but he himself is not lost. He and his friends struggle to know why God allows such suffering.

At the end of Job’s book, God speaks. He does not answer with logic or propositions. God answers Job with questions of His own, questions whose answers illustrate His immense power and wisdom.

God works in all of creation doing wonders greater than any one person or event. He uses all things for His glory. God’s ways are as mysterious as they are marvelous. Too often we get lost in our own questions and ideas. We lose sight of the God who is far bigger than our experiences.

Let us lean upon the Almighty who has spoken and revealed Himself to us. Let’s trust in our God who is doing greater things than we can perceive. Let’s trust in our God who, in His might and wisdom, still cares for the lilies in the field and the sparrows of the sky. We may feel lost in the midst of our life’s losses, but our God is never far away and He wants to hear from us.

*Jesus, as You know our pain and misery, meet us here and lift our eyes up to the Father who loves us.*

9. **God Invites Us**

But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9)

We cannot comprehend the ways and plans of the Lord, though many continue to try. Death was not a part of God’s original plan; we know this is true because He explained how to live. His ways for us are, and have always been, good. In the Garden of Eden, God bestowed on humanity the privilege of loving, caring for, and enjoying everything He spoke into being, except for one tree.

The forbidden tree and its fruit were not a trap. God explained the cost for disobedience to His image bearers. Yet the temptation to desire the one thing God set apart was too much for Adam and Eve. The fruit looked beautiful, and the enemy convinced Eve that God was denying her something that she deserved. So she picked fruit from the forbidden tree and invited her husband to join her. They each took a bite, choosing their own way over God’s.

We do the same. Our Father gives us enough love and truth to have a dynamic, intimate relationship with Him. He gives His visible, tangible love to all of us. But we want more. We want our own way. We want what, to us, looks and tastes good.
The serpent from the Garden of Eden still lies to humanity, still leads us to doubt God’s perfect love for us. “Did God really say that?” the snake asks us. “Why does God keep that good thing from you?” We do not understand why God allows His loved ones to have the power to reject His words, His purposes, and His love. The pain we feel may not have resulted directly from our actions. Regardless, our sin is a part of this broken world. Our sin, in part, results in our pain.

In the Garden of Eden, God knew where Adam and Eve were after they sinned. He called out to them not to find them, but to let them know that He wanted to be with them. Just like He did at humanity’s first sin, God does not wait for us to come to Him when we choose our own way over His. He calls out to us. He beckons us to join Him, to walk with Him, to converse with Him again.

When we missed the mark of His rest, His power, and His work, our Creator sent Jesus to redeem us and bring us back into relationship with Him. Our only hope is in our Father’s love, Who through Jesus has taken away everything that separates us from Him. He is calling us back to Him. Let’s accept His invitation to be with Him.

*Jesus, give us ears to hear the Father’s call of unconditional love.*

### 10. Follow God Even In the Pain

When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.” *(Genesis 9:24-25)*

When we think of Noah, we think of an ark and God gathering all the animals two by two. We remember God saving mankind and repopulating the earth by rescuing Noah, his family, and all those animals. God instructed Noah in building the large ship with no power tools or cranes. God told Noah how much food to gather to feed his family and all the animals. God even told Noah how long and how much it would rain, and why. Noah heard God, followed God, and trusted His provisions.

In this beautiful story we tell ourselves and our children, Noah waited for 40 days and nights while it rained, and through a dove God told Noah when the long trip was almost over. The ark landed on a mountain, and the animals left to repopulate the earth. God assured Noah that He was with him, and that He would not flood the entire earth ever again. God gave Noah and Himself a reminder of this promise: a brilliant display of colors in the sky.

In this story of God’s judgment, however, we often forget about the horror that must have surrounded Noah. We do not hear the screams, the pleading, and the death that engulfed the boat. We do not see the dead bodies of people and animals floating all around the ark for many days. The judgment of God is terrible to behold.
In Genesis 9, we see Noah dealing with these horrific realities. We read that he is drunk. Perhaps he medicates his nightmares with too much wine. The righteous man who followed God and saved all of mankind falls. His family is shamed and becomes divided.

May we learn to follow God through all of the pain. May we learn to follow God after the pain has subsided. May we care well for others before the hard, during the impossible, and after the wounds begin to heal.

*Jesus, may we be diligent to follow You before, during, and after the rains come.*

### 11. Aching Reminders

When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” (Genesis 32:25-26)

Angels are the message bearers of the Almighty. God sent an angel to wrestle with Jacob. What was His message?

God wants us to wrestle with Him. Part of knowing God is reconciling what we know is true about Him with what we experience in life as we follow Him. The ways of God are mysterious. His ways are not always the way we would choose to construct our lives. God wants us to struggle through the mystery of how He works.

When God allows pain in our lives, He wants us to wrestle with Him in it. We roll, grab, and pull at the confusion, to ask questions like “How does the loving God I know allow such suffering?” He wants our hearts, not our resignations. Learning and growing come with wrestling with who God is and our understanding about what is going on in our lives.

At the end of every wrestling match, we know God will win. We will have to submit to His wisdom, skill, and might. But in sparring with Someone greater than ourselves, we become stronger. We are transformed in the process. We become more like Him.

We learn from our own wrestling with God far better than by reading, watching, and listening to knowledge and opinions about God. We must apply and adapt our lives to who He really is and what He is really doing in our midst. To simply throw in the towel in submission before the whistle blows signaling the end of our round is to insult God’s purposes in allowing pain.

Yes, we leave our wrestling match with aches, scars, and sometimes life-long impediments. But all of those outward signs are a testimony to His ongoing training of
our hearts. He expects us to remember our lessons and grow closer to Him through them. We gain strength through our weaknesses.

*Jesus, may we trust You enough to wrestle with what we know to be true about You and how we do not see You working through our struggles.*

12. Failures and Faithfulness

The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:36)

The second half of the great King of Israel David’s life is filled with political turmoil and family upheaval. In almost every way, Absalom represents David’s greatest failures. A beloved son of David, Absalom was born from one of the many wives of the king who should have had only one wife.

Absalom cared about his siblings. He cared about justice especially as a member of the king’s family should. But when his brother sinned against his sister, Absalom had to act due to his father’s passivity. Justice was served. Or was it revenge? The road Absalom took did not lead him to wisdom or righteousness, but to a craving for more power. When evil begets tragedy, we desire the power to make things right. If we are not careful, our zeal will lead to more pain.

Absalom rebelled to the utmost against the power of his father. He performed evil conquests in the middle of the public square in the middle of the day to establish his power and rule over his father the king. The degree of disloyalty, disgrace, and dishonor Absalom brought to his people and his family was abominable.

But David still loved Absalom. How can a father love his son who rebelled so horribly? The deep, abiding love of the father sees through all the hate, deception, and rebellion. As we see David’s sins and shortcomings as a father, we also see a great love that reminds us of the heavenly Father’s love for us. David loved Absalom. How much more does our perfect heavenly Father love us?

When David’s trusted general ignored his command and killed the rebellious Absalom, the king became undone. David cried out for his son. The beloved king, the man after God’s own heart, was broken. At the end of his reign in the midst of his greatest failure, David’s love for his son shone through the darkness. We see in their story that evil, pain, rebellion, and heartbreak never really have the last word.

Our Father loves us. Jesus was the only One who lived perfectly, and He paid the consequences for all our sin. May we go quickly into the arms of the Father, for He loves us perfectly.
Jesus, we praise You for loving us perfectly so that we may experience the love of our Father.

13. Never Too Late

The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel; and none of the kings of Israel had ever celebrated such a Passover as did Josiah, with the priests, the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were there with the people of Jerusalem. (2 Chronicles 35:18)

When darkness has its way, the light grows dimmer and dimmer. Our identity becomes what we see and not who we are. In the waning years of the kings of Judah and Israel, God’s chosen people knew they were Jews. They lived in the Promised Land. They remembered their ancestry, but forgot their Father.

The era of the kings was a time of crisis. The leadership of the nation most often failed to honor God and did not follow His precepts. The Jews were chosen by God but rejected Him during these days by their unfaithfulness to His ways. Living in denial of the love of God put them on the path to destruction, war, and economic havoc.

Josiah became king of Judah when he was eight years old. When he was 16 years old, he started to seek after the God of his fathers. He searched the past to find his future. Once he learned of the one true God, Josiah began to tear down all of the false gods that had infected his people. When he was 26 years old, he turned to the place where God was supposed to be: the Temple. Through the tragedy of losing his father when he was only a child, Josiah grew to depend on His heavenly Father whom he could not see but whom he followed in the dark.

Josiah had only heard of God and seen His Temple. He did not have a written word to tell him how to live or act. But God met him as he sought Him. As Josiah obeyed the truth he knew, God gave him more light. When they renovated the Temple, the Jews found the written word of God which had been ignored for generations. When Josiah heard about this discovery, he turned on God’s light for all of his people by reading the Book of the Covenant to them.

The nation turned back to the ways of God. They remembered their calling from the salvation miracles of the Passover. They recalled that the God of their fathers was still their God. They remembered that He was for them and had light to shine in their darkness. In our darkness, let us turn to seek the God who saves. Let us turn to His word. Let’s remember that He meets us where we are and will lead us where we need to go. Let’s trust that we are children of God who are not orphaned in a dark world.

Jesus, may we be a family who lives not by our sight but by the truth of Your word.
14. Our God Hears

Turn, Lord, and deliver me; save me because of Your unfailing love. Among the dead no one proclaims Your name. Who praises You from the grave? (Psalm 6:4-5)

As David cries out to God in Psalm 6, he lets us hear his anguish and deep frustrations. David confesses what he sees and what he is experiencing. David sings out about the silence of the grave, contrasting the sound with those audible voices who would sing this very song in worship. What good can come from death? David is undone.

We are called to be a confessional people. Confession is less about listing the sins we’ve committed and more about expressing the truth about ourselves and God. We can let the world know we struggle. We hurt. We cry. We are part of this broken world and even add our brokenness to it.

The future is full of hope based on the power, love, and attention of our God who hears us. If we didn’t trust God, we could not breathe another breath, take another step, or dream another dream. He gives us life. Even though we might be breathing, without Him is only death.

We need to speak to God about our frustrations and confusions. Things are not the way they should be. When we sing songs of lament and suffering, we worship a God we cannot fully understand. He is with us but also beyond us. We confess our disappointment. We sing about our fears. But the object of our affections remains the God whom we worship.

He hears our hearts. He cares for our discontent. So let us also sing our songs of hope. “The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer.” Our God is not too distant to hear our lonely voices. He is not too busy to give attention to our cries for help.

God will bring justice. God will bring reconciliation. God will heal all wounds. God will make all things right. The present is not our future. May that future come soon.

Jesus, we pray as those who came before us prayed: come quickly.

15. When Time Crawls

How long, Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)
We believe that God hears us. We know that nothing is too great for the Almighty. We trust in His goodness, that He will use all things for good. Fear has no place in our hearts when we have full confidence in the love of our Heavenly Father.

Yet how long will He wait to act? We sing with empty hands and loud voices, ”How long?” Waiting feels too close to wasting.

We don’t have to know the plans of our Almighty God. We don’t need to understand His cosmic plans for all time and all people. He weaves a beautiful tapestry of life and love throughout the history of creation by working in and through the hearts of His people. How could we who are so finite grasp our parts in His beautiful story? How can we know our segments as they fit into the weaving of His majestic work? We place our minds on hold to keep from pondering things too difficult for us to understand.

Yet we continue to ask: How long will we have to wait? When will we glimpse God’s plan for all this pain? When will the tears be wiped away from our cheeks? When will Justice finally roll like thunder in these valleys?

We can only see the now, but we know the why is in God’s hands. And we know He is good. His steadfast love lasts forever. He keeps His promises.

*Jesus, give us the strength for today and a strong faith in Your tomorrow.*

16. Tell God What We See

My eyes are continually toward the LORD, for He will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. (Psalm 25:15-16)

We are to be a people of the truth. We are called to confess the truth about what we see. Yet on the difficult days, what do we see? We could see another doctor’s appointment or another unmet expectation. We might see a tear racing down a little one’s face.

Sometimes it is too difficult to talk about what we see. Maybe we have said it all before. Maybe it is too hard to put into words. Maybe what we see frightens us so we choose to turn away from it. We don’t want to face the fears; we want our fears to simply go away. The fear that grips our bones is the last one to release its hold on our lives.

Our Father hears us and knows what we see. He is with us. Let’s look to Him as we speak the truth we know. “Lonely and afflicted,” tell Him about your troubled hearts. Give Him your failures and your shortcomings. Describe in detail your enemies who hate you and plot against you. Pray what you desire for Him to give you: deliverance and protection.
As you tell Him the truth of your troubles, know that He is at work. He knows and acts. We may not see His deeds, so we must keep our eyes on His character. Let’s remember the times He has seen us through, the times He has pulled us out of the pain in the past.

He has saved us for Himself through Christ’s affections. Let’s hold on to Him. He loves us. Let’s hold fast to Him with integrity. Let’s do what is right though everything around us is wrong.

*Jesus, be gracious to us as we wait on You.*

17. **Who Do You See In the Dark?**

All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. You have taken from me friend and neighbor; darkness is my closest friend.

(Psalm 88:17-18)

How did Psalm 88 make it into the worship songbook of the Jews? This psalm contains no praise celebrating the God we worship. No hope resounds in its conclusions. Even with its continuous expression of pain, we must sing this song nonetheless.

Strength has left us. Our weary bones ache. We can be surrounded by people and feel more alone than if we were in a desert. People bring no comfort. We see no light.

In our hearts and heads, we feel like—we wonder if—God is letting us down. We don’t see Him break through for us in our time of need. The psalmist highlights the God we are beseeching: “Yahweh, God of personal salvation.” He has saved us. The I AM is for us. The I AM is eternally present as we sing, laugh, play, work, read, pray, question, cry, and stare into nothing. We call out to Him who loves us enough to save us.

Yahweh, today we need salvation. Today, we need a revolution. Today, we need a touch of healing power. God, please hear us, touch us, and give us a miracle.

You are God. You spoke all of creation into being. You have the power to keep us out of this darkness and depression. You could ease this pain of death. We don’t see Your hands. We don’t see how life in this place of darkness praises Your name.

But we will sing with the psalmist. We hear our feelings in these words that have comforted others through the ages, and we are not alone. Even now, we do not give up. We sing even when we do not see You, when we do not feel You.

*Jesus, hear our hearts sing through our tears.*

18. **Wrestling with Time**
There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance...” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4)

The writer of Ecclesiastes calls himself the “Qoheleth.” Although the Hebrew word is most often translated “The Preacher,” another dependable translation is “The Collector.” Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the “Qoheleth” collects wisdom for readers to contemplate.

In the beginning of Ecclesiastes 3, God speaks by giving us much needed perspective. Life is unpredictable in every way but one: everything will change. God ordained different times for seasons in life. Every season has its own wisdom, folly, pain, and excitement—or measure of each of those characteristics—in varying degrees at varying times.

In much of life, we do not have the ability to manipulate circumstances for our well-being. God calls us to follow Him and His ways regardless of our successes or predicaments. Obedience to follow Him is not contingent on our living in any particular season of life. For example, God calls us to care for our bodies. We should eat right and exercise regularly. Yet no matter how well we have cared for our bodies beforehand, a sickness can wreak havoc on us.

No matter what season we are living in, it is always better to live in God’s ways. We can find much joy in life in His precepts. But we will also go through times of weeping and mourning. There is a time and season for us all to suffer and be in pain.

There is also a time for laughing and dancing. If we suffer now, it is for a season. How long? Only God knows. One thing we can be sure of: change is coming. Let’s trust in God’s control, not in our power. Because He designed the seasons, only He can change them. He alone is worthy of our trust.

*Jesus, let us honor You for Your glory in every season and in every emotion.*

19. Fail Proof

Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Our earthly existence is fragile. Our abilities may seem to give us power—until life shows us what true power is. Our intelligence may take us far, but the mysteries of life perplex us all. Our bodies may stay strong with healthy eating and regular exercise. But no matter how strong we are, one microscopic organism can knock any one of us off of
our feet and possibly take us out of commission. While we might have once been able to
traverse the most challenging of obstacles, after one wrong move, tying our shoes can
seem worthy of a medal.

Life can eat us up and spit us out. Unless Jesus comes back before we die, none of us will
make it out of here alive. Our hope must be set on the most powerful thing in the
universe: the love of God. No matter our age, no matter our gender, no matter our social
class, no matter our racial identity—we all need love.

It does not matter who we are or what we have done. The love of God will never fail us.
His love is for all people of any time. His power is available to all who seek His face.
We encounter new problems, new relationships, and new variables that can wreck our
ability to cope with life on earth. But God’s love becomes new each morning to meet
every new trouble. As our bodies come to realize the traps that entangle us, God’s love
will give us the strength and courage to overcome those obstacles. Though we may fail,
His compassions over our conditions never will.

When we see no escape, hear only tragedy, and smell the remains of our defeat, His love
endures. Even though we may not see or understand what He has done, His love has
already won the day. Our intellect and abilities can take us only so far, but the
faithfulness of the Lord our God will take us all the way home.

Jesus, thank You that Your love is enough for any problem, any joy, any instance that
may happen today.

20. Perfect Peace

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust
in You. (Isaiah 26:3)

No one can control the weather. Even with all of our technological advances like shiny
new satellites and cutting-edge statistical analysis, we can still have a hard time knowing
if it will rain tomorrow. In spite of the information we have about what is going on
around us, the older we get the more we realize how little control we have over life. We
cannot predict the future.
The winds will blow and the waters will rise. We rarely know when these changes will
occur. But when they do occur, what we do know can still empower us to keep our feet
planted on the ground. By setting our feet firmly on the character of God, we can
withstand any storm.

We remain steadfast based on who God is, not based on what He may allow. We can
have peace in the midst of not knowing the future when we know God is worthy of our
trust. He is never caught off guard. He is not surprised by what we are going through.
Jesus has seen many of us through the trials and tribulations we face. He has never let any one of us slip between His fingers.

When we place our minds on the power, glory, and goodness of our Father, we gain a powerful perspective. Our hope is in Him, not in our abilities. Our salvation is in Him, not in our wits or intuitions. God is good, and He holds us in His mighty hands. There is no better place to be.

*Jesus, we rest in Your peace, not in our circumstances.*

### 21. God Is With Us

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.

*(Isaiah 41:10)*

There is much in this world that can bring fear into our hearts. Trouble is a very near and present reality. We have bodies that are susceptible to all sorts of diseases and disorders. We live around people who, no matter how kind and nice they are, will disappoint us. The world is finite and does not possess infinite resources to meet our endless desires. It is easy to fall into fear. No one but God knows what the future holds for us and those we love.

Let us find courage in the truth that our God is with us. He has not left us to our own struggles. He is near. He is here. He will give us the power to face fear. Our every fear is eased when we know He does not leave us alone.

We do not have to stand on our own finite knowledge. We cannot solve all our problems. Even the wealthiest people do not have infinite resources to finance problems and make them disappear. We do not depend on answers we can find here on earth.

God uses the kindness of neighbors, friends, and family, but our hope is not in them. Instead, we trust the God Who was, Who is, and Who will always be there for us. He has all the knowledge. He has all the resources. He brings us the right people at the right time.

Even if all else fails, God will never fail. He alone is trustworthy. He will stand up for us when we have no strength to stand. He knows what is right and will never lead us to the wrong. He is our strength for every weakness. He is our help to defeat every problem.

*Jesus, give us Your strength so that we can withstand anything that comes before us.*

### 22. Find Grace In the Mystery
“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

There are limits in life. There are boundaries within God’s design. Water above 100 degrees becomes steam. Water below 32 degrees becomes ice. No matter how much a person may want water to stay water, it will become ice below the freezing point.

Our capacities are limited. Physically, we can only run so fast and jump so high. Some of us run faster than others. Some of us can hardly defeat gravity. But there are boundaries placed on our physical abilities.

How much can we know? How much information can we process? How many ideas and concepts can we fully grasp? Some of us are great with numbers. Some of us will never forget a face. But none of us, with our limited capacities, can understand all things.

God has no limits. The only boundaries around God are what His perfect character demands. Our God takes all that is and all that will be into account when making His ways. His perfect character of love, mercy, justice, grace, and righteousness guides His every choice. We cannot comprehend what or how, but His ways are perfect.

We must release our plans and perceptions into the hands of our God who is greater and better than all we can fathom. Let us trust Him in the midst of what confuses us. Let us remember who He is, what He has done, and what He has promised. No matter how bad things get, let us remember and believe—although we cannot have an adequate idea—how good we are in the hands of our God who loves us.

_Jesus, lead us to love You through our confusion, trusting that nothing confuses You._

_23. Not Fair, Not Right_

. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:23-24)

The world we live in is not the world that was meant to be. When we hit a bump in the road or slam face first into a wall, we know that bump and wall do not belong there. Life is full of obstacles. So why do we ever assume otherwise? We tell young children continuously: life is not fair. When we look around the world or our own backyards, we see that things are not right. While we sojourn in the struggles here on earth, we want to blame God for the pain. He has the power to make everything right. We have to remember: one day He will.
For now, we can individually focus on the biggest problem: I am not right. I did not meet the standard of fair and right that I hold up for everyone else. We are all in the same predicament: we aren’t the glorious image bearers that God created us to be. The world is not right, and we each carry our own faults.

But we can be encouraged that our hope is not based on what we have done; we are justified by means of Jesus’ gift of grace. Thank God that sentence in Romans continues and does not leave us to earn our own salvation. If God had wanted to make things fair, Jesus would never have given His life and thus His grace. We never deserve the mercies and sacrifices of our Lord.

One day He will come back and make all of Heaven and Earth right. He is already doing so in us today. Let us give thanks to Him who will complete the good work He began in us. We do not deserve His love. We cannot earn His favor. We accept that He loves us and has made us right with Him.

Jesus, we receive Your grace and know You will make all things right as You have done in us.

24. No Comparison

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

Beauty is the purest reflection of the face of God. When we are surprised by a majestic sunset, we stand in awe of Him. When we camp beneath the stars, we marvel at His immense strokes on a canvas with no end. When we peer into the innocent eyes of a newborn, we are awestruck by the intimate, gentle Love of our Father.

But when we encounter heartache, our glorious images of God quickly fade away. Our chin falls to the floor and we no longer see a sunrise or sunset. We hunker down at home and won’t go near the woods or a campfire. We look at a newborn child and see his or her future only when innocence is stolen away.

What is true? Which reality should we live in? Neither. The best of what this life offers is stained with sin. The universe is broken and even in the wonder of it all, we can feel lost and alone. All of life was meant to be better than the way it is. The best of what we see is a poor reflection of the truth we cannot see.

Faith is the assurance of the glory to be revealed. There is more. There is better. Right now, we can only see through a shattered glass when we try to capture a glimpse of what is in store. We have to hold on. Nothing here, no matter how beautiful, compares to the glory that is coming. Nothing here, no matter how tragic, can taint what God is doing in
us. The future glory God promises for us makes all other things in today’s life pale in comparison.

Jesus, we praise You for the work You are doing that is far greater than our current experience.

25. Boast of the Cross

May I never boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)

When living with the burden of suffering, we can become weary of the weight. Our countenances become bent and our feet begin to shuffle. Conversations we have with family, friends, and even strangers become centered on what is too heavy for us to bear. Our perspective of our world becomes consumed by our present circumstances.

We need to look to the Cross. We need to understand how the Cross is something we are to boast about. The instrument used by the enemy to destroy our Savior has instead become the glorious symbol of our victory. What should be a symbol of our disgrace is what we place at the top of our most majestic buildings. The Cross is the most identifiable sign of a follower of Jesus.

But we can become too familiar with that symbol and lose what it represents. The Cross itself was and is a means of torture. It is the opposite of life. It is the opposite of light. The crucifixions scattered throughout history represent the most evil times. Good and beautiful people have been nailed to crosses in order to mock the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior.

The Cross of our Savior represents the Kingdom of God. What the enemy would use for the defeat of all mankind, God uses as the cornerstone of hope. For these reasons, we can boast in His Cross.

Where we see our defeat, let us boast of the Cross. Where we see shame, pain, and emptiness, let us boast of the Cross. Let us boast because the Cross of Jesus Christ turns what was meant to defeat us into a symbol of hope.

The world has no power to disrupt the hand of God. He uses the world’s worst to give us His best. So when we see only darkness, we know the light is near and will transform what is wrong into something beautiful.

Jesus, we praise You for bearing Your Cross which gives us hope during our trials.
26. The Fruits of Our Labor

Remember my chains. (Colossians 4:18)

The Apostle Paul is one of the main heroes of God’s story. The devout, righteous Jew had a dramatic encounter with Jesus Himself after the Resurrection and was transformed by the Holy Spirit.

Paul was a champion of the faith. Even the Apostle Peter read some of the writings of Paul and proclaimed Paul’s words as Scripture. The hands of God were on Paul, and He spoke through him. The author of many of the letters to the early Church, Paul is the main light bearer for us as he sheds light on how to live in the ways of Jesus.

Because he was such an important person in the faith, one would think God would send a special unit of angels to protect Paul from all harm. God still uses Paul to instruct followers over 2000 years after he lived his earthly life. As He did with Moses, shouldn’t God send Paul to the safety of some mountaintop so He can speak through him clearly?

God did not set Paul physically aside away from people. God did not remove Paul from sickness and death. God used Paul to encourage believers, heal others, and perform miracles in the midst of all people. God’s kingdom reigned through Paul and through the early Church by the power the Holy Spirit.

No one could stop this movement of God, although they tried. Brutally beaten and maimed, the messenger of God was stoned and put in shackles. But Paul’s pain was not his shame. Paul’s suffering was not proof of God’s absence. Paul lived in victory over pain and suffering. And he encouraged his readers to remember the fruit of his labor: his chains.

Not our freedoms, but our chains are reminders of our victory. May we walk humbly in our call to follow God, no matter what chains He calls us to bear. Let’s remember the costs of those before us as we walk in their sacrifices.

*Jesus, may we remember Your scars and Paul’s chains as we walk by faith in Your good hands.*

27. Consider the Suffering of the Anointed One

Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Hebrews 12:3-4)

Endurance is the strength necessary over time to overcome hardships. When we focus on Christ in His struggles, we gain strength for our own hardships. Although Jesus had the
power, He did not annihilate His opposition. He endured the jabs and barbs of His enemies.

In the struggles of life, we often want our problems and pains to disappear. Jesus is the Lord of Hosts, having the power and authority over hosts of angels. Jesus had the power to make all His problems vanish. Instead, He endured them.

Life here on earth is temporary. The realities we now experience will not last forever. God will restore and heal all of creation. The terrors of hail, hurricanes, and tornadoes will someday cease. The earth itself will one day be redeemed when Christ returns.

In some of our struggles, especially with other people, we will not have to wait for Jesus to return before we begin to experience the life He intends us for us to live. Right now, God is at work saving, restoring, and redeeming people. At this very moment, He is at work in all of our lives.

God has things to do and things to say as He works in, around, and through us. We must obey His leading and follow His activity, especially during the times of weariness in our struggles. He knows that we live in between pain and victory. There will always be more of life outside of our control than in our hands to influence. Let us consider Christ’s endurance of our sin, as God works in us and He waits for us to turn to Him. Let us remember His unjust suffering and allow that remembering to give us strength and perspective for our fight.

Jesus, we recall Your victory through struggles so that we may find strength and hope in You.

28. **Strength by Weakness**

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

(1 Peter 1:6-7)

Pain has its purposes. The trials of this life are not arbitrary or meaningless. We will suffer loss. We will feel anguish and angst. We will bleed and break. But all of those things will pass away. What the enemy designed for evil, God transforms into His eternal purposes.

We are at our best when we live according to our purpose. The main purpose of our lives is to reflect the worth of the One whose image we bear. When we do not see His hand, do we still believe He is at work? When we do not see His face, do we believe He still cares?
When we cannot fathom His glory rising up from the filth of sin and its consequences, do we still believe He is present with us even though He is set apart?

The gift of life is precious and fragile. Trials and tribulations exist to bring greater value to what is central to life: faith. We see life tick away. The days may seem long, but the years race by. Whatever mark we make in this life, it is but a mere breath in the face of eternity. Our ability to trust in the love of God, especially in the darkest of days, has tremendous value to our Lord, giving every fleeting moment immense value.

The trials of life are not meant to simply form us; our struggles reveal what is within us. Who do we lean on when our strength has left us? Where do we turn when we cannot find answers? What do we do when doing the next right thing stops working for us?

In our frailty, we find our true hope. May we rid ourselves of these unworthy crutches. May we free ourselves from finite answers. May we see clearly the One in us who is greater than anything that comes against us.

Jesus, may we trust You through the fires, knowing that what You produce in them will be worth more than life without them.

29. His Suffering for Our Healing

“He Himself bore our sins” in His body on the Cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by His wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24)

Christmas is called the most wonderful time of the year. We stop our lives, decorate our homes, and change our music to remember our Savior’s physical birth day. Born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, Jesus changed everything.

What we celebrate with special desserts and wrapping paper is actually a revolution that began with His birth as a baby. God came into the world just like the rest of us. What a ridiculous concept! The Creator and Sustainer of the earth—of the entire cosmos—became a baby. Yet even more ridiculous is what happened to God.

When Jesus became fully God and fully man, He submitted Himself to the eventuality of experiencing death itself. God became vulnerable in the same ways our flesh is vulnerable. The enemy of all mankind knew the God-man’s susceptibilities very well. Christ began His ministry with pushing the limits of His physical body by fasting, and Satan was there to tempt Jesus’ very flesh.

When Jesus was hungry, Satan tempted Him to use His divine power to end His physical suffering by simply turning a rock into bread. Jesus knew His physical strength was not the solution to physical suffering. The mission of Christ wasn’t to end death and suffering, but to defeat them. Jesus did not defeat the horrors of life by avoiding them or
overcoming them with miraculous powers. He defeated the horrors of life by experiencing them—all of them, even dying by being nailed to a cross.

Why did He do that? His Word tells us: by His wounds—His sufferings—we are healed. Jesus defeated the horrors of life and the finality of death by dying and raising to life again.

At the end of our lives, we will all experience a resurrection as we continue our lives eternally. No physical wound, not even death, can take away the life Jesus freely gives us.

_Jesus, we thank You for suffering so that we might experience healing._

### 30. Expect Suffering

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12-13)

We all desire good. We want those we love to experience joy, laughter, and enduring love. As parents, we want our children to experience good things. We are called to provide sustenance and safety for our children. Jesus knew a parent’s heart and compared it to His heavenly Father’s. How much more good will our perfect heavenly Father do than us—parents who sin?

It is easy to be shaken when trials, tragedy, or tempest rain all over our lives. God is all-powerful. He could stop all pains; He could keep all bad things from even beginning. But He does not. Instead, the pain is coming and we should expect it.

The Apostle Peter himself knew the depths of pain and suffering. The Acts of the Apostles describe how the devastation surrounding Peter spread the good news of Jesus. Trials feel strange, but they are to be expected in God’s perfect plan.

We avoid the paths of pain and suffering, and we should. We who are parents do not want our children to experience suffering. So why does our heavenly Father, who could keep us all safe from pain, allow it? Theologians give this age-old question the term “theodicy.” We cannot force God to give us the answers to why He permits such intense struggles. But while we are befuddled by what He allows, we don’t need to be surprised or caught off guard. God did not keep His own Son from pain. Christ suffered, so we should expect to do the same.

When we experience life like Jesus did, we weep over death, we agonize over wayward friends, and we feel the pain of our own bodies. We need to remember that pain is to be
expected; let’s also remember that Jesus won our final victory with His nail-scarred hands.

*Jesus, we thank You that the struggles in life never hold the final word.*

### 31. Where to Place Your Anxieties

Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)

Our Father loves us. He has crafted us from birth and is constantly at work molding us into being His masterpiece. Because we are His children, He cherishes our hearts. He is a good Father and wants us to experience the best of life.

We should not be anxious. Worry should not overwhelm our minds. God loves us not only where we should be, but especially where we are. We are a work in progress. He knows us not only as we are today, but who we will someday become. He is outside of time and not bound by our finite perspectives.

God knows us from the inside out. Jesus is only perfect Person, and our Father knows we are not Him. He sees us bogged down by unanswered questions and weighty situations, and He desires to hear what concerns us. Let’s ask for His help. The troubles of life are difficult for us to see through. God would love to give us a renewed vision of life. He is there to lift us out of the muck and mire.

Let’s let go of what we think we perceive. Let’s release our beliefs about what lurks around the corner. We can rely on the One who sees all things. We can trust in the One who is transforming what could be into what will be. We can have confidence that He will guide us through what seems impossible—and indeed would be impossible—without His help.

He has us. Let’s tell Him how we feel. He wants to hear it from us personally.

*Jesus, hear our heart’s desires and align us with Your glorious will.*

### 32. Patience: A Virtue for Our Time

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:8-9)
Time is much more than the rotation of the planet, far more than seconds falling off the face of a clock. Time passes quickly during good times, but it creeps by slowly in difficult times.

Whatever time really is, God is not enslaved to it. As He is with everything else, God is Lord over time. What seems like forever to us is to God like the four minutes it takes for the water to boil on the stovetop. He is not bound by how we perceive reality.

When we cannot see our way forward, it seems like God is in no rush to help us. We struggle with why God seems to be taking His time. We can feel like He is busy taking care of other things—things more important than us. The truth is that God wastes no time. He is never in a rush or stressed by events because He has all of the time in the universe to take care of things. God is not slow; He is patient. Let us take comfort that our God is slow to anger and quick to forgive.

He knows our pain and suffers with us. He is waiting on us to change and come to Him. He has allowed suffering for a millennium while waiting for us to know and fall in love with Jesus, our Savior. While time seems to crawl by during our trials, our suffering will not last a second longer than what God allows. He won’t waste a minute of our pain. His best work takes time for us to appreciate.

*Jesus, may we remember Your timeless perspective while we wait on You.*

### 33. Death or Life

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

Life is more than what we can see, taste, smell, hear, and feel. Many people lead wonderful lives without one or more of the five physical senses. But there is a spiritual reality that can be more tangible than even what our central nervous systems can register.

We have a spiritual enemy who is at work. This enemy is well-schooled in his methods, perfecting his tactics throughout the centuries all over the world. Our enemy is crafty and cunning. Many people have been wounded, captured, and destroyed by his activities.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught clearly that the enemy wants to disrupt and devastate His kingdom purposes. Jesus began His ministry on earth by preparing for this spiritual fight, fasting and training in silence and solitude. During His training, He was tempted by the main deceiver three times; Jesus did not falter but fought back by quoting Scripture.
The enemy’s purpose is to steal away our hopes and joy. Focused on killing our neighbors, our friends, and our family, the enemy wants to destroy all things present and future.

But Jesus gives us life. He gives us an ever-flowing, never-ending life no matter what the enemy does or is doing. May we take shelter in the arms of the Life Giver who is greater than all the enemy’s ways or plans.

*Jesus, protect us from the schemes of the enemy as You lead us in Your way of life.*

**34. God Weeps**

Jesus wept. (John 11:35)

The shortest verse in the Bible is one of the most important pieces of Holy Scripture. Who do we imagine when we think of Jesus? Do we see Him teaching to thousands on a bright green field? Do we see Him walking the crowded streets of Jerusalem? Do we see Him bleeding on the Cross? Do we see Him revealing Himself to the disciples after the Resurrection? Who do we see?

All of these images are true and important to consider. The image of the Creator of the universe with tears rolling slowly down His face is an unusual picture. Jesus felt deep sadness. The Man who knew no sin and conquered every temptation cried in the face of death.

Why did Jesus cry during the wake of Lazarus? The mourners’ cries are a different kind described by a different Greek word. The word for the mourner’s cry connotes a loud wailing bringing lament. But the words used for Jesus’ sorrow here is not a loud boisterous cry but a quiet shedding of tears. Jesus did not mourn like the others, but He cried none the less.

Jesus knew this particular day was not the time for His friend Lazarus to experience the fullness of death. Jesus used His power to defeat death and snatched Lazarus from death’s grip. But Lazarus would die again. Jesus would not raise him then. Jesus wept.

Jesus wept because death was a present evil that took all His friends and family. Death and the sin that created it still reigns on the earth. It has been over 2,000 years since Jesus defeated death by His Resurrection. But we all still face earthly death. When death makes us weep, we weep not like those who do not have the hope that Jesus gave. We have the same hope of Lazarus. We all will one day sleep, and we who trust in the resurrected Christ will experience His Resurrection as well.

The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords will come again. Jesus will raise His followers from death to life. The victory is assured. But until that day, it is good to cry like our
Savior cried. We can feel our tears and know His love.

*Jesus, You know the pain of death. Meet us in our tears as we wait for Your final victory.*

35. **Remembering His Goodness**

Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at His feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched Him and how she had been instantly healed. Then He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.” (Luke 8:47-48)

The Hebrew faith has guidelines which we Christians often don’t follow today. Although the Law prohibited the Jews from wearing cloth of linen and wool mixed together (Deuteronomy 22:11), our modern clothes may contain a percentage of cotton, a percentage of nylon, and even a percentage of wool. In our ignorance, we rebel all the time against God’s Law.

The Lord wrote His Law for Israel when they lived in a system requiring a Temple or Tabernacle. Although it may seem odd to modern ears, every piece of God’s Law is good. Jesus Himself said so. Jesus was a righteous Jew and followed the Law without ever breaking its commands. He honored every bit of the Law down to the smallest stroke of the pen.

One of the Law’s requirements concerned an article of clothing which Jesus wore—a shawl trimmed with tassels. A good Jew wore the tassels on his body as a reminder of God’s goodness found by following God’s precepts. The shawl trimmed with tassels represented a man who followed the way of God. Jesus wore a shawl trimmed with tassels all the time.

The Law was a gift from God and gave Jacob’s descendants an identity as one people. But the same law could separate people from each other. The woman who needed healing from her blood that wouldn’t stop flowing knew she was physically unclean; she knew she could make others unclean by being so close to them. Although she seemed far from God, the Law, and her people, she knew her only hope was Jesus. She risked further scorn, shame, and persecution from everyone around her in order to get close to Him.

This woman’s healing came not from the consciousness of Jesus but from the clothes He wore. Jesus was not made unclean by her touching His body, and God used a symbol of His righteousness—the shawl trimmed with tassels—to heal a woman in desperate need of Him. The love of God came to the woman because she trusted that touching a symbol of Jesus’ righteousness was enough for her healing. How much more should we trust in the very life of Jesus shed for our deliverance?

*Jesus, may we risk scorn and shame by having faith in You to deliver us in our times of need.*
36. Painful Memories

The third time He said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love Me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love Me?” He said, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said, “Feed My sheep.” (John 21:17)

Jesus loved Peter. For all his shooting-from-the-hip answers and hot temper, God used him to build the first-century Church. Peter was the person appointed to bring to the Jewish people the good news about the new way of Jesus. It is important to remember that Jesus used Peter’s greatest failure and pain to prepare him for his mission.

Peter confessed the deity of Christ at the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter swore his allegiance to Jesus above his own life. But when Jesus was on trial, Peter turned his back on the Suffering Servant. He denied Him, denied Him, and cursed in denial of Him. Jesus knew the weakness in Peter’s heart and told him ahead of time that he would deny Him. When Peter heard the rooster crow the third time, he was crushed. Peter knew he was a failure.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He met His disciples on the shore. He took Peter aside to question how much he loved Him. He asked Peter three times, “Do you love Me?” Jesus brought to the forefront Peter’s greatest failure. Peter understood what Jesus was saying even as he was hurt by Jesus’ words.

Jesus knows our failures and the suffering that they cause. He knows we, like Peter, cannot understand what the Almighty is doing in our midst. A crucified King who would rise again to life on the third day? Enduring defeat in order to achieve ultimate victory? God does not abandon us in our ignorance; instead, God teaches us in the midst of His forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation.

Jesus told Peter the high cost of following Him. He prophesied of the horrific death that lay ahead of Peter. Was this punishment for Peter? No, Peter was forgiven and beloved and commissioned to spread the best news across the entire world. Jesus told Peter, “Follow Me,” the same call He first extended to Peter when He found him fishing. So much had changed in those few years; everything had changed, except for the love of Jesus and the call to follow.

Jesus used a memory that Peter would love to forget to remind Peter of something that he must never forget: Jesus’ deep love of and trust in Peter. God allows painful, awful things like denial and betrayal to show how much He loves us. Let us not live in fear of our past or present pain. Let’s live by the truth God shows us of His love and our call to love like Him, no matter the cost and no matter our past.
Jesus, we accept Your mercy and strive to give Your grace to those who, like us, need it.

37. In Remembrance: His Death

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes. (1 Corinthians 11:26)

Proclaiming the Lord’s death sounds like a strange place to focus. Our Lord has risen from the dead and is seated at the right hand—the place of power and authority—of the Father. Yet joining with the church in taking communion—the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist, as some traditions call it—is an essential and regular part of Christian living. The Church is quite different all over the world, but when we do what Jesus commands us to do until He returns, we are all the same. When we gather at the Lord’s Table, we proclaim His death.

Although the Apostle Paul was not there himself, in his letters to the Corinthians he recorded the setting of the Last Supper which Jesus had with His disciples. “On the night Jesus was betrayed,” this communion was instituted as a unique form of our worship. The meal Jesus had with His disciples was holy and sacred. Yet the one who would betray Him ate with Him.

On the very night of His betrayal, Jesus chose to celebrate His mission with the friends He had called to learn from Him. Jesus served the Last Supper to all of His disciples that night, including Judas Iscariot. Judas, who walked, talked, and worked with Jesus for three years, had already agreed to turn Him over to a death squad. Judas knew what the authorities had planned for Jesus. What Judas didn’t know was that Jesus knew he would betray him, and how, and why. The rebellion against Jesus was worse than just Judas. Before the sunrise, all of his disciples, even Peter, the one who initially yielded a sword in Jesus’ defense, turned away from Him.

Often we feel like God is absent in our pain. In His absence, we feel like He has betrayed us. Jesus knows how we feel. He has felt the rejection. Jesus knows our pain. He would never and will never betray us.

Remember this: Jesus never turned away from His disciples. He did not stop them from their cowardice. He loved them through it. Even if all those we love turn and run, we have a Savior who never ran from pain: His or yours. He loved us to death.

Jesus, may we remember that You who were betrayed will never betray us.

38. In Remembrance: His Brokenness

...and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, “This is My body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” (1 Corinthians 11:24)
When we observe the Lord’s Supper, we remember Jesus Christ of Nazareth, our Lord and Savior. Nazareth, a town known for producing nothing, produced the Anointed One. Jesus, born under a star, was born in a manger. Jesus, the traveling Rabbi, had thousands gathering to hear Him teach, but only a few stayed at His bloodied feet. Our Jesus saves us not with the powerful sword, but with His broken body.

Our Savior won the victory over death not through His God-ness, but through His brokenness. He did not leap over a burning volcano to prove His valor. He did not rush up an embattled hill to prove His courage. He did not dive onto a horde of demons with His mighty fists pushing them back to the gates of hell. Instead of by some mighty deeds, Jesus saved us by allowing the enemy to break His very body.

In the same way a child will bend a loaf of bread, Jesus’ body was broken. His crucifixion was no epic battle, even though the authorities captured Him in the Garden of Gethsemane with armed soldiers. Jesus prevented all defense of Himself. He even healed the only soldier wounded in the initial chaos.

Jesus chose to be broken. From His ultimate sacrifice, He still feeds us today. We eat the bread and are nourished. We gain strength from His broken body. He fought for us, and He won the war against sin and death. He is coming back to claim all of what and who are His own.

Let us remember, especially in our own brokenness, that He was willing to be broken for us. Let’s remember His strength, which appeared to others to be only weakness and defeat. We also, like Him, can be victorious even in our brokenness. Let’s remember His brokenness.

Jesus, we remember Your brokenness has given us hope and strength for life today and forever.

39. In Remembrance: His Blood

In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” (1 Corinthians 11:25)

A pivotal verse in the Law of Moses states, “the life of the body is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11). Blood represented the essence of life. When a creature was sacrificed, the blood was poured out on an altar. It ran onto the ground. No person was to consume the blood, said the Law. Life—the blood—belonged to God alone.

The main reason sacrifices were made during the Tabernacle and Temple periods of the Hebrew people was for the purpose of spilling blood. God is holy and separate from
humankind. Life is required to close the gap between God and mankind, and there is no life without blood. An animal’s life was taken and its blood poured out as a sign of and means to a relationship between a holy God and sinful humans.

The New Covenant, or promise, that Jesus gives the world is sealed by His blood sacrifice. Jesus acknowledges the historic gap that separates us from majestic holiness of God and offers His blood as the Life to close that gap. Yet opposite of what the Law taught the Jews, Jesus commands His disciples to drink the wine that symbolizes His very blood.

Rather than poured out on an altar or consumed in a fire, Jesus’ blood—the essence of His life—is to be consumed by us. Only by taking in His very essence can we have eternal life with Him. Only the perfect life of Jesus the Christ is worthy to be brought into the arms of the Holy Father.

The sacrificial system is strange to most of us living today. We have lost the smell of spilt blood. We do not comprehend the idea of our best animals “wasted” on an altar. Yet Jesus tells us to remember that our lives are found only in the Suffering Servant who sacrificed Himself—spilled His own blood—to bridge the gap to life eternal with Him. Let’s remember the gift of His Life, His blood.

*Jesus, we give thanks for Your sacrifice that makes all who trust in You right with God.*

40. Precious Tears

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

We have cried many tears. We cannot grow accustomed to loss because we know deep inside is a void that should not be. We must be able to feel, to remember, to reflect, and to cry. Damming the stream of tears risks creating a hardened heart.

A heart that can feel no burning, no churning, and no chilling quickly becomes a heart that cannot chuckle or laugh. Soon, this passive heart becomes the heart which can no longer love. The heart of stone is protected from hurt, but the heart which cannot be harmed can no longer feel joy. We find our hearts buried deep underground, hoping that someone can save it.

Jesus, our Shepherd, finds us, His lost sheep, in pain. We come to Him with scars revealing old wounds. We apply dirty bandages to cover new cuts which only make things worse. The day we see Him face-to-face, He will see us with tears running down our cheeks. It will be the last time we will shed those tears.
This world has dashed us to the ground. Hurt by accident, diseases, and wars, we have been cut by those we love, those we should have loved, and those we never knew. We have failed in our mission to care for the poor, bring healing to the blind, and mend the brokenhearted. We have been unable to do to others what we have desperately needed done to ourselves. Although we may have had some success, the world is too big for us.

So Jesus will reach out to us. On that day when He makes everything right, He will bring us close to Himself into a gigantic embrace. He will squeeze us in His arms and gently say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” We will pull our heads away from His shoulder and we will look into His eyes.

What will we see? He knows our regret, sorrow, and gut-wrenching pain. They are no new revelations to Jesus. He has been with us the whole time. Imagine the strong and gentle face of our Savior as He wipes away our precious tears.

*Jesus, we long for that moment when we are in Your arms when all that is wrong all will be made right.*
APPENDIX B

Project consent form

Hello,

My name is Nace Lanier. I am doing a study on how Life Groups at Burke Community Church may better care for one another as they go through difficult times. Let me explain the project to you in detail.

The project will center on devotional reflections and physical objects to focus BCC groups on caring for a person within the group that is currently suffering. Once a need arises within a group the person struggling will receive a clinging cross and the rest of the group a coin. The group will read and reflect on a forty-day devotional that will lead them into a deeper understanding of the work and presence of God in pain and suffering. The physical objects will be carried to remind them of their commitment to God and each other through the trial. The groups of Burke Community Church will be surveyed before any particular issues arise and again at the end of the study.

The project is not meant to be a solution or remedy for someone to overcome a problem. The project is reorienting the group about expectations as children of God who are called to follow a crucified Savior. Each person will also keep a reminder, either a cross or a coin, to help him or her focus on the reality of God in the midst of life especially suffering.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to fill out an anonymous pre and post survey about your experience in life group. You will also have an opportunity to write an anonymous narrative about your personal experience during this study. The study will begin in March of 2017 and continue until October of 2017.

You can ask questions about the study at any time. Also, if you decide you don’t want to finish, you can stop whenever you want. There are no right or wrong answers because this is not a test.
As a participant of this study, you may feel extra stress during a difficult time. The efforts of comfort could lead to more discomfort. More attention by the group to pain and suffering, may not alleviate but exasperate your conditions.

As a participant of this study, you may feel less of a stress or burden during a difficult time. You may experience a time of peace and comfort even when physical symptoms or situational crisis has not been directly affected. Even though there will be no direct gain to you for taking part in this study, we may learn more about how to love one another like Christ loves us. We may learn more about coming alongside a person in suffering even though we cannot solve what is causing them pain.

No one else will know if you were in this study and no one else can find out what answers you gave. All surveys and interviews (if appropriate) will be kept anonymous. I will keep all the records for this study on my laptop without names to associate them. After the study is sent to Fuller Theological Seminary, all surveys and interview notes will be deleted. No minors can be considered in this study. If a member of the group is arrested or becomes incarcerated, you may continue in the study but any information about your group will not be used. Remember, you can ask any questions you may have about this study. If you have a question later that you didn’t think of now, you can call me at 571-438-3622 or ask me next time.

Would you like to read or hear about this study a second time?

Signing your name at the bottom of this form means that you have read or listened to what it says and you understand it. Signing this form also means that you agree to participate in this study and your questions have been answered.

__________________________________ Signature of Participant
__________________________________ Typed/printed Name
______________________________ Date

__________________________________ Signature of Leader
__________________________________ Typed/printed Name
______________________________ Date

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Overview

Pain is a common thread woven throughout all people. Suffering touches every soul yet we are often confounded by its existence. We understand pain and suffering were introduced as a result of original sin. We know Jesus is the solution. But we, the church, struggle to lead others into His nailed scarred hands. The resources created (cross, coins, and devotional) will help address the root issues and give tangible helps to guide us to encourage each other.

The devotional reflections and physical objects will focus your small group during a time when a person in the group is suffering. Once a need arises within a group the person struggling will receive a clinging cross and the rest of the group a coin. The group will read and reflect on a forty-day devotional that will lead them into a deeper understanding of the work and presence of God in pain and suffering. The physical objects will be carried to remind them of their commitment to God and each other through the trial.

The person is not to be singled out any further. The group should not go into a study time about pain and suffering. But in the background of their daily lives each member will focus on the crucifixion of Jesus to place the difficulties of life in the proper framework.

Pain and suffering are a foundation stone by which the church was built and must continue to grow. God is not absent from trials but very present even when silent. The community of believers will be the most effective place of redemption and transformation when she can bring life from the clutches of darkness.

The resources are not meant to be a solution or remedy for someone to overcome a problem. They are to be a help on their journey. They are given to for the group to reorient their expectation of being children of God who are called to follow a crucified Savior. Each person will also keep a reminder, either a cross or a coin, to help him or her focus on the reality of God in the midst of life especially suffering.

Welcome

- Have different people be ready to read the following verses as we go through the study. (either have them printed or have them read them from their Bibles)

  - 1 Peter 1:6,7
  - James 1:2-4
  - Hebrews 10:24,25
  - 2 Corinthians 1:3-7
  - Proverbs 17:17
  - Joshua 1:7,8
  - Psalm 119:105
Open in prayer

Opening discussion question: Why do people “leave the faith” during a time of pain and suffering?

- Follow up question: what are the purpose of trials?

1 Peter 1:6,7 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

James 1:2-4 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Key concept: Trials do not create faith but reveal it.

Pain and suffering burn away false ideas and poor supports that we can come to depend upon. They are not all bad things. For instance if a person loses a job, they find out how much of identity was in their occupation. The job may have become an idol. The trial did not make them more dependent on God but revealed where they found their identity. The purpose of trials is to transform us into people who will glorify and honor Christ.

Next Question, in your past, how have you been encouraged or encouraged someone else during a difficult time?

Key concept: Getting together is one of the key means of encouragement.

Hebrews 10:24, 25 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The “Day” approaching is the “Judgment day”. It is understood that pain and difficulty will be increasing as we get closer to the Day. Therefore, we need to be ready and focused to be there for each other because tough times are not to be considered the exception.

Key Concept: We are to comfort others in the way we have been comforted.

There is no Biblical formula to thrive during pain, suffering, and grieving. We are all different and all need time to see God in the midst of it all. But we are not without
guidance. The Apostle Paul describes that we each have ways to care for people and we are to have courage to step up and help others in those ways.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

The most important word in this passage is obviously “comfort”. You can get uncomfortable reading aloud by how many times Paul writes “comfort”. It is like Paul trying to get a point across to us.

We have received comfort from God. We are to give the same kind of comfort to others. God has given us His grace and mission therefore we will have times of suffering like Him. But in those times, we know they are for an ultimate good. The good, at the very least, is that we can then comfort others at another time.

We do not comfort others by simply sharing our sad story. We share, not to compare, but to let them know they are not alone. And we must remember that we can only hear another’s story when the time is right… which is hard to judge. Therefore the first call of comfort is to be a safe place to hear hard things. When we hear them, we go take those things to the throne of our Father.

The following are three things that can help during times of suffering: a cross to carry, a coin to remind, and God’s word to light the way. The cross is for the one who is going through a difficult time. The coins are what the group carries to remind them to pray. The devotionals are an anchor for the group to lean on, God’s word, as they journey together.

A. A Cross to Carry

Luke 9:23 Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

The cross is the central image of a Christian. We see it on our church buildings, on our literature, and in our jewelry. But somehow we forget its central meaning: painful sacrifice. We rightly focus on the eternal life we gained through the death of Jesus. But we too often sail past how the cross was also an image Jesus used to describe each of us who decide to follow Him.
A follower lives to deny our first personal inclinations to our own selfish desires. But what does that mean? Serving others? Yes but more.

We all have our stories. No one has led a life without some measure of problems and pains. We have people that have wounded us. We have wounds that are invisible. We have wounds that may be seen through surgeries and diseases. We are at war with an enemy who desires are to steal, kill and destroy. The warfare gives us all burdens to carry. We all have crosses to bear as we follow the One who bore His cross to His death.

B. A Coin to Remember

**Proverbs 17:17** *A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.*

**Joshua 1:7-9** “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

The coin is a tangible reminder to pray. We have all said, “I’ll pray for you” and forget to pray. We have also been good about praying once hearing of an issue. The coin is to help us remember to pray for the one going through a trial. Please commit to putting it in your pocket everyday for a period of time (as long as the 40 day devotional). You will be surprised how often just having the coin in your pocket will help focus you in praying.

One side of the coin has the verse from Proverbs 17. The Word tells us that these difficult days are what we are here for. We are the family of God and we come around each other in times of need. By our commitment of prayer, we being exactly what we were born to be.

The other side of the coin is a verse from Joshua. It can be difficult to know how to pray. Even when you have something specific, over time we can lose our vision of why we are praying. The words “Be Strong and Courageous” are taken from the beginning of Joshua. No matter what a person is going through, everyone needs courage and strength to overcome.

The coin has a relief of a lion. He represents Christ, the Lion of Judah. He is our hope and our Savior. The lion was drawn for a ten year old who was in the final stages of brain cancer. The artist wanted to give him a picture to encourage Him. Her family read the Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis. The main figure in the series is
the Christ figure, Aslan. He is a lion, powerful and yet gentle. It was the way the artist viewed Jesus. She knew Jesus would be there for the young boy to give both comfort and strength. Therefore as we pray, let us pray for the strength and courage that we need from Christ during these difficult days.

C. The Bible to Light the Way

**Psalms 119:105** *Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.*

Lastly, we have the devotionals. There are 40 different scriptures and reflections. These are to be read once a day for 40 days. They are not for the group to discuss or study. They are to be a foothold for the group to gain strength and perspective. The Word of God lights the way forward. We often do not know what to say and think when it comes to pain and suffering. It is important to not get lost on how to react but to keep focused on the next step. We need His light, more than ever, when the path is dark and it is hardest to navigate.

The cross, the coin and the devotionals are tools to help us navigate through a difficult time. They are not solutions but helps. They will not fix what has gone wrong. But they will help place us in the path to love. There may be other things God calls us to do in response to this time. Regardless of other actions, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus and trust He will see us through.

Any Questions?

Prayer
APPENDIX D

Presurvey Questions

Welcome to My Survey

Thank you for participating in our survey. Your feedback is important.

1. Please mark the response that best represents your understanding for the following questions:
   ○ I do not agree.
   ○ I somewhat disagree
   ○ I agree and disagree
   ○ I somewhat agree
   ○ I agree

   • I have a good understanding of the purposes of God in pain and suffering.
   • Not as merely as a consequence of personal sin, I know that God has used and does use pain and suffering throughout the Bible to further His work.
   • I expect pain in suffering in my life as I live for God’s purposes.
   • I am at peace with God moving in mysterious ways rather than ways I reasonably understand.
   • I find that physical objects help in my spiritual life.
   • I have a connection of fellowship with others in the small group.
   • I incorporate praying for others in my daily prayer life.

   The following two questions are optional. There is no character limit.

2. Describe a positive experience with a small group as you lived through a difficult time.

3. Describe a negative experience with a small group as you lived through a difficult time.

At the end of September, you will have the opportunity to take a post survey.
Our prayer is that you will be encouraged, grow and mature through this time. The post survey will be very similar so that we can best hear about what you may have learned. Thank you for participating.
APPENDIX E

Post Survey

Thank you for taking your time to help!

Participation in using the program in your small group is not necessary to fill out this survey. Thank you for participating. Your feedback is important!

Please mark the response that best represents your understanding.

1. Please mark the response that best represents your understanding for the following questions:

   - I do not agree.
   - I somewhat disagree
   - I agree and disagree
   - I somewhat agree
   - I agree

   • I have a good understanding of the purposes of God in pain and suffering.
   • Not as merely as a consequence of personal sin, I know that God has used and does use pain and suffering throughout the Bible to further His work.
   • I expect pain in suffering in my life as I live for God’s purposes.
   • I am at peace with God moving in mysterious ways rather than ways I reasonably understand.
   • I find that physical objects help in my spiritual life.
   • I have a connection of fellowship with others in the small group.
   • I incorporate praying for others in my daily prayer life.

   The following two questions are optional. There is no character limit.

2. Describe a positive experience with a small group as you lived through a difficult time.

3. Describe a negative experience with a small group as you lived through a difficult time.
4. How much do you agree with the following statements?

- I do not agree.
- I somewhat disagree
- I agree and disagree
- I somewhat agree
- I agree
- Not Applicable

- The cross was helpful in my journey through the situation.
- The coin was helpful in my journey through the situation.
- The devotionals were helpful in my journey through the situation.
- As a small group leader, I was prepared to equip the group to participate.
- As a small group participant, I was prepared to participate as a member.
- I would suggest the program to another person to help them through a situation.

Suggestions

Please share any suggestions you might have to creating a better experience with the Helping program. You may speak about the introductory lesson, the cross, the coins, the devotionals, or whatever you consider helpful.

Thank you for sharing your feedback with us.

We pray that you have been encouraged, grown and matured through this time. Thank you for participating.
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