**How To Get Through What You’re Going Through: #1 Struggle**

**Series Big Idea:** During the toughest, most tragic moments of our lives, God is with us, God loves us, and God wants to use our most trying struggles to develop a living faith within us that can withstand any circumstance.

**Message Big Idea**: Pain can be a helpful reminder that God is not only our Lord, but He is also our loving Father.

**Scripture**: Exodus 3:1-14, Exodus 13:17, Exodus 16:1-3

**Takeaway:** We hope each person will learn the difference between “crying out” to God and “complaining” to Him. The cry is a deep longing to someone we believe cares for us, whereas a complaint is something we register in an overly bureaucratic process, desperate to be heard. The similarity in the two is that we are going to go through trials, but the difference is, when we cry, we know we have a compassionate Father who is willing to be with us during our turmoil.

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**Introduction: Bridger Wilderness Area**

Has anyone here ever been to the Bridger-Teton National Forest in Wyoming? I’ve been to several of our National Parks, but haven’t hit this one yet. Just look at this picture… Doesn’t that make you want to go there? This is actually a picture of the Bridger Wilderness Area within the park. It contains 600 miles of hiking trails and is home to the tallest mountain in Wyoming.

In learning about the Bridger Wilderness area, I came across something that is quite amusing. Apparently there is a comment box located at the base of the mountain where hikers can leave suggestions. Here are a few samples of the comments received:[[1]](#endnote-1)

* **“Please avoid building trails that go uphill.”** Seriously. What about “Tetons” did you not get when you signed up for this hike?
* Here’s another one: **“Ski lifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them.”**
* Or: **“Escalators would help on steep uphill sections.”**
* And my favorite: **“There are too many rocks in the mountains.”**

At what point did the people leaving these comments forget that this is a hike up and down a mountain? It’s supposed to be hard! Challenges and difficulties are part of the deal!

The truth is, we don’t like hard things, do we? Specifically, we don’t like pain. Who here would say, “I really enjoy pain and tough times?” No one, of course! We are more comfortable with a path that is level and smooth and where there aren’t any rocks to trip us up.

Most of us do anything we can to avoid pain and suffering. And you know what? That’s a smart thing! But there’s just one problem… Pain is inevitable. Every person experiences some suffering. Struggle is a part of life.

**Series Introduction**

I am pretty certain that every person here has gone through or will go through a period in life where you will struggle.

* It might be something you got yourself into – a poor decision that has taken you down a path you never intended.
* It could be a situation brought on by someone else – perhaps your pain is a result of someone else’s bad decisions.
* Or it could just be that life hit you with a circumstance that was beyond anyone’s control. No one is to blame for the mess you find yourself in, but nonetheless, it’s here.

Suffering is a reality of life. Every one of us goes through stuff. What we want to suggest in this series is that it’s *how* we get through what we’re going through that really matters. How we respond to difficult circumstances can set a trajectory for the rest of our lives and our journey with God.

A number of scholars and theologians have characterized our spiritual journey in three phases or stages. They give a variety of names to these stages, but for the purposes of this series, we’re going to talk about them this way:

**“Confident Faith”** is the first stage. We have “Confident Faith” when we first find our way back to God, and it’s a stage that can last for a long time. We’re excited. In many ways, it feels like life is finally working like we hoped it would.

* Prayer seems to really make a difference.
* Obedience to God’s commands results in blessings.
* We feel a lot of joy and gratitude.

No matter how long this season of “Confident Faith” lasts, inevitably, at some point we will find ourselves in a season we’ll call **“Challenged Faith”.**  Suddenly, everything that seemed to work in the “Confident Faith” stage just doesn’t seem to be working anymore.

* We feel like God has stopped hearing our prayers.
* Obedience doesn’t seem to be getting us anywhere.
* Doubts grow.
* Questions emerge.
* We long for the days when our faith seemed new, fresh, and unstoppable.

*(Share your own personal story of a season of Challenged Faith)* I (Tammy) remember a season of my life when I lived in a small town in central Illinois. I had moved there to serve God by working for a ministry on a college campus and I loved my job…but I was so desperately lonely. For six years I prayed and prayed asking God to help me find a circle of peer friends or even just one person I could hang out with on Friday nights, and I just couldn’t seem to connect with anyone. I’d always been someone who easily made friends and who loved having a circle of people to do life with so I just couldn’t understand why God wasn’t providing that for me now…especially because the whole reason I moved to that place was to serve him. It felt like he was ignoring my prayers. I felt like he didn’t care about my needs. And even though I was a pastor, I felt like that that stage of my journey was going to make or break me, spiritually.

What about you? Are there circumstances in your life right now that are challenging your faith? What are you going through? In fact, I want you to take out this torn piece of parchment paper that you received when you came in today. Take just a second and write down the thing or things in your life that are hard right now. What is causing you pain? Maybe you’d even call it suffering. Take a moment and write a word or draw a symbol to represent what you’re going through. I’ll do it too.

We’re going to come back to this piece of paper so just hold on to it, but this hard stuff, this stage of “Challenged Faith” has the potential to take us to the next stage, a stage we’re calling **“Living Faith”**. “Living Faith” is a deep and abiding faith that remains strong in the midst of life’s most difficult situations. Most of us want this kind of faith. We want to be able to live with peace, hope, and confidence no matter what life throws our way. But here’s the thing… the only way to grow a “Living Faith” is to journey through the “Challenged Faith” stage.

So in this series we’re going to focus on the journey through “Challenged Faith.” How do I get through what I’m going through? How will I respond to pain and suffering?

**Word: Background**

During this series, we’re going to look at a story from the Old Testament…the part of the Bible written long before Jesus was born…from a book called Exodus.

Now before we get into the particular passage we’re going to explore today, I want to give you a little background about what happened up to this point in the story.

The story is about the Israelites…the people of God. God had set them apart from the very beginning for a unique blessing and mission in this world. They were special to God, and we get to read about their journey all throughout the Old Testament.

At one point during a period of severe famine in the land, all the Israelites came to the land of Egypt. They went there because one of their own, a man by the name of Joseph, found favor with the Egyptian king. Joseph rose to be second in command over all of Egypt, and at first, it was great! The king gave the Israelites their own land and they had a good life… at the beginning.

But now it’s hundreds of years later and that favor has long been forgotten. The Israelites are living in slavery to their Egyptian masters. They’re mistreated and abused. Their lives are brutally hard.

How will they get through what they’re going through? Well, today we’re going to look at two different scenes in their story and see how they responded each time. What we’ll find is this one group of people had 2 very different responses.

**Word: Exodus 3:1-14**

Let’s pick up the story in Exodus 3. At this point in the story, God is choosing a man named Moses, an Israelite, to lead his people out of Egypt. In Exodus it says that Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law and came upon what’s called the “mountain of God”:

**“There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.” (Exodus 3:2)**

Pretty freaky, right? Understand, all throughout the Bible, fire is used as a frequent sign of God’s presence. The author’s original audience would have understood right away that something very important was happening in this interaction.

So let’s continue… Moses sees the bush burning and did what any intelligent person would do… he walks over to investigate this crazy situation. As he gets closer, the Lord begins to speak to him from within the bush about the people of Israel. He says:

**“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey… So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:7-8 & 10)**

Now there’s a whole lot happening here, but the thing I want to draw our attention to in particular is this:

What were the people of Israel doing in response to their suffering? Let me read that part again, **“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out...” (Exodus 3:7)** How did they respond to their suffering? They cried out to God! In the midst of their misery, in the midst of their suffering, they cried out to God.

And God, like a loving father who cares deeply about his children:

* Sees his people
* Hears their cries
* Feels concerned about them

It’s crucial for us to remember that this God of the Israelites is the same loving Father who sees, hears, and is concerned for us in our pain and suffering. This isn’t just some ancient story, but a real example of God loving people and entering into their story to help them in their pain.

**Word: Exodus 13:17-18**

Let’s keep going…a few chapters later in Exodus 13, we see God intervene and respond to the cries of his people. Through Moses, he leads the Israelites out of slavery. But here’s something interesting I want to point out…it says:

**“When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter…God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.” (Exodus 13:17-18)**

When I first read this I thought, “Wait a second, does God need a map? Why didn’t He lead them on the shorter route to the Promised Land? Why did he lead them out by the desert road?” This was probably the last thing they were expecting. Ending up in the desert probably didn’t feel much like “rescue” at all.

But the more I thought about it, the more it occurred to me… don’t our lives feel like that sometimes? Don't we sometimes find ourselves in a place that doesn’t look or feel like “rescue.” I mean, we cried out to God and our circumstances may have changed, but we find ourselves traveling a road that is not what we were expecting.

You see, even the path of rescue can be the place of “Challenged Faith.” God is at work, but we still find ourselves feeling like prayer isn’t changing things. We wonder if God’s listening or if he cares. We may even begin to doubt God’s existence or at least his goodness because we’ve ended up in a place that doesn’t feel like “rescue.”

But if we continue in the story, we find that a lot of things happened on that desert road. On that desert road, the Israelites see:

* *(On Screen: Exodus 13:21-22)* God leading them in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to show them the way.
* *(On Screen: Exodus 14:21-22)* They see the Red Sea miraculously part to allow them to escape the pursuing Egyptian army.
* *(On Screen: Exodus 15:22-25)* They see salt water turned into fresh drinking water to quench their desert thirst.

All along the desert road, they get to watch God do some pretty amazing things. And you’d think that since they got to see God show up in incredible ways, they’d be good to go for whatever’s next, right? They’d have a “Living Faith” to handle the challenges of the desert. Well… that would be too easy.

**Word: Exodus 16:2-3**

How did the Israelites, this same group of people, respond to this next season of “Challenged Faith?” As we fast-forward to Exodus 16, we read:

**In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron** *(Moses’ brother)*. **The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” (Exodus 16:2-3)**

After everything that’s happened… after all the great things they’ve seen God do… the Israelites find themselves on the desert road and their faith begins to crumble. They complain about where they are and what they don’t have. They haven’t ended up where they thought “rescue” would take them, and so their “cries” to a loving father turn into “complaints” against an absentee boss.

Do you see it? One group of people…2 very different responses. In Egypt they cried out to God, in the desert they complained about him. There’s a distinct difference between “crying out” and “complaining.” A complaint is a verbal raid against injustices that we perceive have been inflicted on us. It’s like saying, “We deserve better than this!” Whereas a cry is a deep lament, a plea for help in the midst of our suffering.

The difference between the two can be boiled down to this: trust. In crying out, we express a determination to trust God. We express our pain and suffering and a real need for rescue. In crying out, we trust that we have a loving Father who sees us, hears our cries, and is concerned. We trust him even when his response isn’t what we were expecting.

But complaining about God is lethal to trusting him. Instead of trusting him and his response, we decide we know what is best and demand that God respond how we choose.

**Cry Out to a Loving Father**

Here’s the bottom line… Every one of us is going to face difficult seasons of “Challenged Faith.” Every one of us has to get through things we’re going through. Take a look again at that painful thing you wrote down on this torn piece of paper. What has you feeling like you’re lost in the desert? What about life has you feeling disappointed and disillusioned – maybe even questioning your faith?

* Maybe it’s a **relationship** that has turned out nothing like you thought it would be.
* For some, your desert is full of **unanswered questions** . . . so much of life just doesn’t make sense.
* Maybe it’s **work** or **finances** that have you feeling backed into a corner. You wonder how it’s all going to work out.
* There may be some here whose desert has to do with your **health** – the results you received weren’t what you hoped they would be.

Here’s the thing: You are one person, but you have 2 possible responses.

Today we want to encourage one another to cry out to a loving Father. Maybe the thought of crying out to God never really entered your mind. Maybe you are afraid to or feel uncomfortable with it or even wonder if it’s ok.

Well, it’s more than ok. I think it’s actually what God wants!

In this season of “Challenged Faith,” will you cry out to your loving Father?

**Story: Brene Brown**

Brene Brown is an American scholar, author, and public speaker. She’s done extensive research on the topic of pain and vulnerability. Her TED talk on the subject went viral and still is one of the most watched talks in history.

While researching and writing about living a wholehearted life, she realized that she wasn’t walking the talk. Her life began to spiral downward, and she experienced a desert season of her own. She ended up in intensive therapy, turning to God, and even to her own surprise, looking for a church. What she learned in the middle of that season of “Challenged Faith” really spoke to me. I wanted to share a bit of it with you today.

(Video: Brene Brown)[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Conclusion**

We so want God to take away the pain – pull us out of the desert, just make it go away. And sometimes he does. He really does. But **every** time, **all** the time, he says, “I will sit with you in your pain. I will walk with you through the desert. Cry out to me, and I will promise to be there.”

Will you cry out to your loving Father?

*(Cross image)* I love how that Brene Brown piece ended with the camera going to the image of Jesus on the cross. On the night before his death, Jesus cried out to his Father, God. He asked if it was possible to be delivered from his suffering. And yet, that day he chose to endure the most excruciating desert experience anyone could ever imagine.

Jesus’s suffering on the cross may not give us the reason for our pain and suffering, but I believe it tells us what the reason is not. The reason is not that God doesn’t love us. The cross upon which Jesus died, as awful as it was, demonstrates God’s love for the world. The cross says that God will be there. He is not indifferent. The cross means Jesus went through ultimate suffering for us.

Will you cry out to your loving Father in your season of “Challenged Faith?”

He will be with you. He grieves with you. He will help you get through what you’re going through.

1. From the book Light and Life by Mike Neifert. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Excerpts from http://www.mbird.com/2013/07/brene-brown-reflects-on-how-jesus-wept/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)