**How To Get Through What You’re Going Through #3 - Submit**

**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**: Life is not about you, but about you being a willing participant in a larger mystery, and God will use anything (including pain) to mold you into the likeness of Christ so you can shine brightly in the story He’s writing for our world.

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 34, Numbers 13-14

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**Introduction: Family Vacations**

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you planned something out but things didn’t go according to your plan? Of course you have!

One of the things that comes to mind for me is family vacations growing up. I (Tammy) can remember one family vacation that involved a tire falling off of our van…while my sister was driving 60MPH down the interstate! Another year we were camping in Myrtle Beach when red ants overpowered our campsite…*biting* red ants! Another time we were driving down a road and I was in the backseat looking out the window when suddenly I noticed our pop-up camper, which we were supposed to be towing, was rolling alongside us down the highway! Yes, sometimes our thoughtfully planned out family vacations went awry. Sometimes they looked more like this…

(Video: Griswold’s arriving at Wally World)

The most painful part of that clip was those shorts!

But, seriously…Life doesn’t always work out the way we planned, right?! Out of nowhere life throws us a curve ball, and we find ourselves in a situation we didn’t ask for and never wanted. Sometimes we feel like punching “Wally the Moose” in the nose.

**Series Recap**

In this series we have been discussing how we navigate challenging seasons of life; those times in our lives when we experience pain and suffering. How do we get through what we’re going through?

We’ve talked about how our journey usually involves three phases of faith. The first phase is **“Confident Faith.”** We often have “Confident Faith” when we first find our way back to God, but this phase can go on for a long time. We’re excited! Life feels like is going along the way we think it should: prayer changes things, obedience brings blessings, joy and gratitude seem to abound.

The last stage is **“Living Faith.”** “Living Faith” is a deep and abiding faith that isn’t contingent on circumstances. This is the faith we all want, but how do we get there?

The middle phase is what has the potential to take us there. It’s called, **“Challenged Faith.”** “Challenged Faith” happens when life doesn’t seem to be working out. Our prayers seem to be bouncing off the ceiling and we wonder if God is listening, if he cares, if he’s going to do anything about our current situation.

We experience “Challenged Faith” when life throws us a curveball.

As we move forward in this series, we’re wrestling with this question: How will we respond in these times of “Challenged Faith?” How will we respond to our pain and suffering? Our response is crucial because often it will determine whether or not we ever develop a “Living Faith.”

**Word: Deuteronomy 34:1-5**

If you’ve been with us during the first two weeks of this series, you know we’ve been looking at the story of the Israelites as God chooses Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. But as we’ve seen in weeks 1 and 2, the journey to the Promised Land takes the Israelites through the desert. The desert is not the place they expected to find themselves. It wasn’t what they imagined “rescue” would be. Time and time again they find themselves questioning and doubting God as they face all kinds of challenges along the desert road.

Does anyone ever flip to the back of a book to see how the story ends before you finish reading it? Well that’s what we’re doing today by fast-forwarding to Deuteronomy 34. We’re jumping to the end of the story. At this point, Moses has been leading the Israelites on a journey that’s lasted a whopping 40 years! They’ve been wandering in the desert for *40 years!* But now they stand on the brink of the Promised Land. Let’s see what happens:

**Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land—from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea… Then the Lord said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’” Deuteronomy 34:1-4a**

Imagine with me, for a second, what this must feel like for Moses. There he sits on top of Mt Nebo; he is perfectly positioned to have a great view of the entire Promised Land. He can literally see for miles! After all these years of struggle and challenge, God’s promise is finally coming to fruition. I can imagine him sitting on the edge of the mountain, taking a deep breath, and looking out over this beautiful land. Let’s keep reading. God continues:

**“I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.” And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. Deuteronomy 34:4b-5**

Wait. What?!? This isn’t what’s supposed to happen! Moses doesn’t get to go? He’s come all this way, put up with so much, and he doesn’t get to enter the Promised Land? It doesn’t seem fair!

I don’t like this part of the story, and I don’t like when stuff like this happens in my life either. What is that thing in your life that hasn’t gone as you planned? What curveball has life thrown your way? What are you going through that you never asked for and never wanted?

Today when you came in, you received a piece of paper that looks like this. Take just a minute and write down that thing you’re going through, that challenge you’re facing, the pain or suffering you are enduring. What in life just isn’t fair? Write down a phrase or draw a symbol to represent that hard thing you’re facing. I’ll do it too. Just hold on to this for a second.

**Word: Numbers 13-14**

If we back up a bit in the story of Moses and the Israelites, we discover this isn’t the first time they stood on the brink of the Promised Land. 40 years earlier, they were in this same position. They’d been walking the desert road for a little while at that point. They’d already had their ups and downs with each other and with God, but now they are poised to enter the land. It is here that…

**The Lord said to Moses, “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.” (Numbers 13:1-2)**

So Moses selects 12 men and sends them off to spy on the land God’s promised to give them. These 12 explore for 40 days and return to camp with grapes, pomegranates, and figs…just a few of the spoils they discovered in the land. They report to Moses:

**“We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit.” (Numbers 13:27)**

Sounds awesome, right? Who couldn’t go for some sweet honey or a juicy grape after a long trek through the desert? Moses had to be pretty pumped, but then the report turns sour…

**“But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large… We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.”… And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. (Numbers 13:28, 31-32)**

With that, any trust the people had in God crumbled. They begin plotting a return to Egypt…a return to the slavery God had delivered them from.

*(On Screen: Numbers 14:6-9)* Only 2 of the 12 spies, Joshua and Caleb, stood firm in belief. They beg the people to obey God and trust him. “Don’t be afraid for the Lord is with us,” they plead. But their courage falls on deaf ears. And the people of Israel break God’s heart yet again as they refuse to take the land.

**The Lord said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?” (Numbers 14:11)**

God forgives them, but as a consequence of their sin, the Israelites will wander in the desert for 40 years; one year for each of the 40 days they explored the land. During that time, every grown adult, except for the 2 courageous spies, Joshua and Caleb, will pass away. Only their children will live to see God’s promise fulfilled.

As I think of Moses as an elderly man, days away from death, standing on top of that mountain, it seems unfair that he didn’t get to enter. After all he did, after all he went through, after all the suffering he endured, he doesn’t get to experience the blessing?

Perhaps this story bothers me because it forces me to face an uncomfortable question: What if I’m never delivered from my suffering? What if I never receive what I’ve longed and hoped and prayed for? What if “getting through what I’m going through” doesn’t mean my pain goes away? What then?

**Why Do We Suffer?**

Those questions haunt us because without deliverance, without resolution, without a payoff, we’re left with empty answers to the question: **Why Do We Suffer?** That’s the hardest part of our pain, isn’t it? Not understanding “Why?”

Sure, sometimes we suffer as a result of our own decisions. Moses and the people of Israel ended up in the desert for 40 years because they refused to obey God. I’ve had to face the consequences of more than one bad decision in my life.

Sometimes we suffer as a result of the decisions of others. Dads who walked out. Corrupt financial advisers. Children who break our hearts.

But sometimes there is no good perceivable explanation for our suffering. There is no good answer to the “Why?” question.

Good meaning people might try to provide answers. But if you’ve ever sat in the middle of this kind of unexplainable pain, and my guess is many of us have, you know that most of the platitudes offered do little to heal your soul.

I’m going to be straightforward with you this morning… We’re not going to be able to give a reason for suffering. Sometimes there just isn’t an honest answer to the “Why?” question. But what we want to suggest today is that there is actually a more important question than “Why do we suffer?” It’s the question: **“How will we respond to suffering?”**

**Story: Viktor Frankl**

How many of you are familiar with a man by the name of Viktor Frankl *(On Screen: Picture of Frankl)*? He said something worth considering on this topic, but before I tell you what he said, let me tell you a little bit about him. Frankl was a renowned Austrian psychiatrist whose theories have had a profound impact on the world of psychology. He’s best known for his classic work, *Man’s Search for Meaning,* not just because it is the primer on his theories, but because it chronicles Frankl’s own personal experience with unexplainable suffering.

You see, on October 19, 1944, Frankl and his wife, Tilly, his mother and his father were all arrested by Nazi officers and transported to the Auschwitz concentration camp. *Man’s Search for Meaning* chronicles his experience in Auschwitz as well as the three other concentration camps he endured until the close of the war. Forced labor. Starvation. Brutal beatings. The constant fear of the gas chambers.

His father died in his arms in Auschwitz. Only after liberation did he learn his mother was killed in the gas chambers and his wife was transferred to another camp where she died.

The suffering Frankl endured is unthinkable. There will never be a good answer to the question of why this happened. But through this experience, Frankl discovered that there was one thing that could never be taken from a person even in the worst suffering imaginable.

He says: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

He goes on to explain:

“Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it…Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you.”

–Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

“Suffering in and of itself is meaningless…” Perhaps we need to remember this the next time we’re tempted to offer a cliché like “everything happens for a reason” to someone in pain…or the next time it’s offered to us. Often there is no satisfying answer to the question “Why?”

But we can give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it. It’s our response to pain and heartache that determines whether our suffering will have any meaning.

**Responding to Suffering**

Friends, I don’t know what it is you are going through today. I don’t know what you wrote down on this torn piece of paper.

* Some of us are suffering physically.
* Some of us are in pain over broken relationships.
* Some of us are stinging from the consequences of bad decisions.
* Some of us are overwhelmed with loneliness.
* Some of us are holding the pieces of a broken dream.

As you look at this thing that is causing you pain, I can’t offer you an answer to question, “Why?” But perhaps we can encourage one another to make intentional choices about *how* we will respond to our suffering. Let me suggest two…

First, we can choose to **Let Suffering Transform Us**.

Think about this… Sometimes people intentionally choose suffering for the purpose of transformation, don’t they? Want an example? Let me ask…has anyone here ever run a marathon? In order to do that, you had to undertake a challenging, time-consuming, physically demanding training program, right? You logged countless miles through all kinds of weather, suffered through cramps and quite a few blisters, restricted your diet and sacrificed time with family and friends. And why? So that you would be transformed into someone who would be able to cross a 26.2 mile finish line.

You see, we’re OK with the suffering we choose for ourselves because we value the transformation. But here’s something to consider…unwanted suffering can transform us too. It can transform our character. It can transform our values. It can transform us more to the image of Christ.

In her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, author Barbara Brown Taylor says:

I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.” –Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*

We can choose to let our suffering transform us. We can ask God to teach us things in the dark. We can ask him to use our pain to grow us in new ways.

You see, if we allow God to transform us through the seasons of “Challenged Faith,” we might just find that a “Living Faith” begins to grow in us…a faith that isn’t contingent on circumstances. We can choose to let suffering transform us.

And here’s a second response we can choose: We can **Let Suffering Remind Us of the Bigger Story**.

Let me ask you, did Moses die a failure? Absolutely not! In fact, if we go back to Deuteronomy 34, listen to how he’s memorialized after he passes away on the doorstep of the Promised Land:

**Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. (Deuteronomy 34:10-12)**

To this day, Moses is remembered as one of the greatest Biblical heroes. Understand, his life was not a failure. His suffering was not meaningless. Moses played a HUGE part in the bigger story of what God is doing in the world.

Have you ever felt like a failure because you’ve worked so hard, but life hasn’t turned out like you planned? You’re not. You are a part of a larger story. There’s nothing quite like suffering to remind me that life is not about me. There is a bigger story of restoration and redemption at play. It’s the story of all God is doing in the world to help people find their way back to him.

Moses played a huge role in that larger story. And you and I have a role to play in it too. Even if we aren’t delivered from the pain and suffering we face in this life, are we willing to play our part in the larger story? It may be that the very things we experience on our desert road, the very things we’ve written down on this piece of paper, equip us to play that part. If we choose to let him, God can use anything, including our pain, to write a story that is bigger than anything we could write on our own.

**Conclusion: Jesus’ Suffering**

Friends, I don’t know what you’re going through today. I do know that some of us, perhaps many of us, are walking hard, long desert roads. I can only encourage you to remember that there is one who walks beside you, who knows your pain, who hears your cries. He identifies with your suffering because he is himself one who suffered.

In the 12th chapter of Hebrews we’re told that **“For the joy set before him he** (Jesus) **endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2)**. In the middle of his suffering, Jesus chose to set his heart on the larger story. He chose the “joy set before him.” And the whole world was transformed because of that decision.

There may never be a good answer to the question “Why?” But we have the opportunity to choose the “How?” May we find grace and hope in our suffering Savior to get through what we’re going through.