

GOSPEL-DRIVEN COUNSELING FOR SUFFERING

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If we are honest, it is much easier (in the sense of being straight-forward) to counsel sin than it is to counsel suffering. And in reality, those are the only two kinds of counseling that exist. When someone comes to us seeking perspective, guidance, or hope because their life is hard, either they are facing the consequences of their own sin or they are facing the consequences of living in a broken world. If it were not for sin and suffering, there would be no counseling.

Now when we use the term “suffering” we are referring to something more than physical pain. We are using the term in its theological sense to refer to any life hardship that is not the result of our personal sin. This would include things like: the effects of other people sinning against us (abuse or neglect), diseases of all kinds, “technical difficulties” (for instance if Y2K had been a reality), natural disasters, economic collapses, chronic pain, and bodily degeneration.

As we said, it is much clearer what the objectives are when we are counseling sin. If someone is violently angry, having an affair, lying on their taxes, refusing to forgive, dishonoring their parents, considering an abortion, using harsh language, cutting to relieve anxiety, undermining their boss, or neglecting their children we know what to tell them. Stop it! There may be some confusion on how to help them cease sinning or how to deal with the aftermath of their sin, but the objective is clear. Often with suffering the objective is not clear. We did not cause it, so we cannot “stop it.”

The Gospel for Suffering?

Further, since we are discussing “Gospel-Driven Counseling” we could all readily admit that it is clearer how to apply the Gospel to sin than it is how to apply the Gospel to suffering. God sent His Son, Jesus, to die for our sin. Jesus bore the penalty of our sin. The Gospel calls us to accept by faith the grace of Christ’s sacrifice as the substitute for our sin. We do this through repentance and forsaking our sin. We then bear fruit in keeping with repentance by the enablement of the Holy Spirit to glorify God rather than please ourselves as we did before the Gospel captured us. That is the Gospel for sin.

But what is the Gospel for suffering? Again, we have nothing for which to repent in suffering. We wish we had something to repent for so that we would feel less powerless and confused. At least then we could do something. This is one of the things that angers us about suffering. The law of cause and effect, sowing and reaping no longer apply during suffering. With no connotation of whining, suffering is not fair! The fact that cause and effect has been turned on its ear makes “being practical” a nearly irrelevant concept. What would we do differently to make suffering un-happen?

When we do not know what to do we often, like Job, get lost in the question, “Why?!”

- Why did this happen?!
- What did I do? For what am I being punished?!
- Was there not an easier way to teach me whatever I am supposed to be learning?!
- What on earth could warrant this level of suffering?!

We can go on and on for days, weeks, months, years, or (like Job) chapters rephrasing and reframing the same basic question. When we cannot have relief, we begin to look for explanations as the consolation prize. Even “answers” can rarely get beyond the generic response “because we live in a fallen, broken world.” And that does not explain why *my* son died, *my* child miscarried, *my* mother has breast cancer, *my* house burned, or *my* company went belly up so I cannot feed *my* family.

Counseling as Being Incarnational

This is why counseling suffering cases often calls for a higher degree of personal involvement. The aspect of the Gospel that we are called to minister is more the incarnation than the atonement. We notice this emphasis in the book of Hebrews. As the author of Hebrews seeks to comfort his readers in their fallen world struggles, there is a frequent appeal to the incarnation of Christ (emphases added).

Hebrews 2:17-18, “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For *because he himself has suffered when tempted*, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Hebrews 4:14-16, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are*, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Hebrews 5:7-9, “*In the days of his flesh*, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, *he learned obedience through what he suffered*. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.”

Hebrews 6:19-20, “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, *where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf*, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”

Hebrews 12:1-3, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame*, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

This is much messier. With sin, we only have to deliver the message of atonement (we cannot die for their sin). But with suffering, we are called to be the Body of Christ which reminds our fellow Christian of God’s identification with our suffering and His personal words to them, “I will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb. 13:5)... Though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will be with you (cf. Ps. 23:4).”

Unfortunately, this means counseling suffering will not be as “neat” as counseling sin. We can, in principle anyway, abstain from sin. With every temptation God does provide a way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13).

However, we cannot abstain from suffering. No amount of wise living, right choosing, or fervent praying will make us Teflon to suffering.

It is in the name of trying to give an “answer” to suffering that many well-meaning Christians jump to Romans 8:28 in their counsel of a hurting friend.

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

While this passage is undoubtedly true, I do not believe it is where we need to begin in order to offer “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering.” But it is close. I would invite us to begin to unpack the implications of the Gospel for suffering in this passage’s introduction Romans 8:26-27.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Here we see that God does not begin His ministry to the sufferer with explanations or a defense of His divine purposes, but with compassion, giving voice to our unutterable torment, and a deep understanding of its impact on our heart. In the same way, our counsel of those in suffering should never jump to Romans 8:28 until we have thoroughly incarnated Romans 8:26-27. If we do, we will likely misrepresent our God with His own Word. We will insinuate that our suffering friend just needs to understand God better or trust God more, when God would have us begin by listening, interceding, and groaning with them.

For this reason, our primary focal passage will be a Psalm. In many ways the Psalms are one of the primary fulfillments of God’s promise in Romans 8:26 to provide words for our inexpressible experiences. The rest of Scripture is God speaking to us: commands, principles, history, and prophecy. But the Psalms are God giving us words to capture our experience; they are meant to be spoken, prayed, sang back to Him. The Psalms cover the full breadth of human experience.

We are going to look at a Psalm of suffering, Psalm 102, to unpack what Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering looks like. This Psalm, like many others, is rooted in the experience of suffering. As we prepare to have God walk with us through our suffering and give words to our experience, it will be helpful to look at how our outline has been developed.

- I. Cries of Despair and Suffering (v. 1-11)
- II. Realities about God’s Activity (v. 12-22)
- III. Comfort without “Answers” (v. 23-28)

In the first eleven verses we will notice that the author speaks exclusively in the first person (I, me, my). His experience is not only intense, it is intensely personal. The Psalmist is groping in the darkness. When the transition is made in verse twelve, the language changes to second and third person (you, generations, her, servants, nations, kings, Zion, the destitute, their, a people, prisoners, they). As the author struggles to find hope, he must do so at a distance. Hope is far enough from his personal experience that it cannot yet be spoken of in the first person. Finally, in the last six verses, the author begins to mingle all three (my, I, you,

they, children, offspring). The Psalm does not end as neatly as we would like, but we hear the author trying to mingle the hope of verses 12-22 with his suffering from verses 1-11.

Entering a Prayer of Suffering

I. Cries of Despair and Suffering (v. 1-11)

*¹Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you!
²Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my distress!
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily in the day when I call!*

We immediately hear how rattled and desperate the Psalmist is. Our mind's voice should not read these verses calmly. They were not written that way. The first two verses contain five imperative tense verbs (hear, let, do not, incline, answer) and this is captured in the translation by the concluding exclamation mark! This is not how we typically teach people to pray. It does not follow the ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) acrostic.

The Psalmist is shaken and doubting God, "If You are there, Lord, hear me! I don't know where You are! Come back! Don't leave me here! I need help! I am alone! I don't like the thoughts going through my head, hear me please!" These are the desperate cries of a small child separated from his parents in a large, fast-moving crowd – utterly helpless and overwhelmed.

This is not the only place in Scripture where we find this tone. God knew these moments would not be rare experiences for us, so He put many such passages in His Word. Another can be found in Psalm 44:23-6. In this Psalm, the author is again confused by suffering that does not have a logical cause. This is the conclusion to the Psalmist's reflection over a confusing era in the life of Israel.

*²³Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!
²⁴Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
²⁵For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
our belly clings to the ground.
²⁶Rise up; come to our help!
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!*

There is some comfort to be found in the fact that God included a little heresy in the Bible. Verse 23 calls on God to awake, but we know we serve a God who does not sleep (Psalm 121:3). Verse 24 accuses our omniscient God of forgetting. When God gives us words for these most intense moments of suffering He does not expect us to pray technically correct, theologically accurate prayers. God longs to correct our misconceptions of Himself, but He invites us to come to Him from where we are.

When we seek to do “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering” we need not pray neatly or eloquently with our friends. Honestly, they will have a hard time joining with us in those kinds of prayers. That is the purpose of audible, corporate prayers; to enable those present to join with us in communing with God. These first two verses give us liberty to begin praying from where our suffering friend is at.

*³For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.*

*⁴My heart is struck down like grass and has withered;
I forget to eat my bread.*

*⁵Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my flesh.*

We see in this Psalm that the kind of suffering being faced is physical pain and disease. As we look ahead to verses 23-24, we see that the author may be very near death, or at least his experience is intense enough that he thinks he is. We can look in these verses and see hopelessness (my days pass away like smoke), chronic pain (my bones burn like a furnace), loss of strength (my heart is struck down and withered), loss of appetite (forget to eat my bread), presumed irregular sleep (if the author’s pain level results in perpetual groaning), and overall physical deterioration (my bones cling to my flesh).

This is a dark Psalm, but only one among many dark Psalms. Again, God knew we would need many expressions for the suffering we face in a fallen world. To help you see this, read Psalm 88 – the “black hole” of dark Psalms. Read it slowly and let it have its full impact. The only hope in this Psalm is that it is addressed to God. For a moment, let the cynicism of the questions grip you; let the fruitless search for answers swallow you.

Psalm 88

¹O LORD, God of my salvation;
I cry out day and night before you.

²Let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry!

³For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.

⁴I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am a man who has no strength,

⁵like one set loose among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

⁶You have put me in the depths of the pit,
in the regions dark and deep.

⁷Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah*

⁸You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
 ⁹my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call upon you, O LORD;
 I spread out my hands to you.
¹⁰Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the departed rise up to praise you? *Selah*
¹¹Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
 or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
¹²Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?
 ¹³But I, O LORD, cry to you;
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.
¹⁴O LORD, why do you cast my soul away?
 Why do you hide your face from me?
¹⁵Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
 I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.
 ¹⁶Your wrath has swept over me;
 your dreadful assaults destroy me.
¹⁷They surround me like a flood all day long;
 they close in on me together.
¹⁸You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
 my companions have become darkness.

An alternate translation of that final phrase could be “darkness has become my only companion (see ESV footnote).” Where is the hope in this? What are we supposed to take from such a grim passage? Paul Tripp answers this way:

Psalm 88 gives us hope in our grief precisely because it has no hope in it! It means that God understands the darkness we face. He is right there in it with us, “an ever-present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1). The Lord of light is your friend in darkness. The Lord of life stands beside you in death. The Lord of hope is your companion in your despair. The Prince of Peace supports you when no peace can be found. The God of all comfort waits faithfully near you. The Source of all joy is close by when death has robbed you of joy.¹

God invites us to come to Him in all of our brokenness even before we attempt to “put Humpty Dumpty back together again.” Our Messiah is one who, “was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Is. 53:3). In these Psalms we get a picture of how deep the incarnation went into our world of suffering and how uncomfortably close we must be willing to get to our friend’s suffering if we are going to counsel in a way that reflects the personal touch of the Gospel.

*⁶I am like a desert owl of the wilderness,
 like an owl of the waste places;*

¹ Paul David Tripp, *Grief: Finding Hope Again* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2004), 5.

*⁷I lie awake;
I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.
⁸All the day my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.*

We see that the pain experienced by the Psalmist is more than physical affliction; it's isolation, rejection, and derision. When we recognize the poetic nature of this Psalm, we realize that the author is building to a climax. The physical pain was not the worst part of his experience; it was facing that pain alone. Each of the birds listed is out of place; a "desert owl" does not belong in the wilderness and a "sparrow" is a social bird that does not belong alone.

Now we see another ugly face of suffering. Suffering tends to cause people to back away. Friends do not know what to say so they begin to avoid us. Strangers who do not know us begin to wonder (or at least we think they do), "What did they do?" Enemies now have an open wound at which to target their taunts and magnify the impact of each attack.

So what does "Gospel-Driven Counseling of Suffering" look like? In this moment, it looks like "weeping with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). We penetrate the encroaching darkness with our presence, a phone call, or a letter so that our friend does not have to "lie awake" (v. 7) and doubt whether anyone, even God, cares. We contradict the thought, "No one wants to hear what is on my mind...again." We patiently listen as our friends may repeat themselves many times as they struggle to make sense of their life and put their story back together again within the larger story of God's redemption. We are willing to be uncomfortable with them (by avoiding the giving of clichés and pat answers) when no "solution" is available. We protect this person from being alone in their suffering to wrestle with Satan's lies uninterrupted.

We must admit how uncomfortable this kind of counseling is. In our helping we must face the uncomfortable reality that we too could face what our friend is facing. It reminds us of our powerlessness. It reminds us of our frailty. It reminds us of the temporalness of life. It reminds us of how utterly God-dependant we are at every moment. These are the initial truths of the Gospel. This is the essence of what it means to need a Savior. But when we face it in suffering rather than because of our sin, it feels much more out of control. In order to minister the Gospel to our suffering friends we must call on God for the courage to face these frightening realities with our friend.

*⁹For I eat ashes like bread
and mingle tears with my drink,
¹⁰because of your indignation and anger;
for you have taken me up and thrown me down.
¹¹My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.*

Now we see the ultimate poetic climax of the Psalmist's experience: a sense of God-forsakenness. We hear the Psalmist searching for meaning. He has reached that point (again) where he is asking, "Why?!" Some believe that the author of this Psalm was the prophet Daniel, a man known for his great faithfulness to God. Yet the only way that he can make sense of what is happening to him is that God is angry with him. He believes that God has, in a fit of anger, spiked him like a football—"taken me up and thrown me down."

There is no evidence that the author has done anything that would warrant that kind of reaction from God or that God is truly angry with the Psalmist. But we would rather God be angry with us than our suffering be random, unprovoked, or meaningless.

To illustrate this let me tell a personal story. On two consecutive summers around my freshman year of college I was hospitalized for over a week with severe stomach pain. My white blood cell count was 2-3 times higher than normal. I was told that was cancer patient range. After a battery of tests the first summer they sent me home with no diagnosis and told me I was perfectly healthy. At the end of the week on my second hospitalization, after again finding nothing on a battery of tests for serious illnesses, they were running one final test. It required me to be put to sleep. I remember waking up and my mother saying, “Good news, you’re healthy. They are releasing you.” I was enraged! It might have been the drugs, but I grabbed my IV tower and marched up and down the hospital hallway in my hospital robe hunting a doctor. I wanted a reason for my pain more than I wanted to be healthy. I could no longer trust my health without an explanation for my pain.

I believe this captures some of the Psalmist’s desperation. Meaningless suffering is the cruelest torture, so he creates an interpretation to life in order to relieve this torture. Suffering often tempts us to skew our interpretation of life in some manner. Because our pain is real we begin to tell our life story as if our greatest fears were real to. For the Psalmist, his greatest fear was that God was unprovokedly vengeful.

When we seek to offer “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering” we must have compassion for these false stories our friends begin to tell. Patiently, we must help them see that their stories reveal more about their fears than their God. Here we can begin to be more directional with our counseling—sharing truths about God, His character, and His redemption of suffering. But we should do so with the full awareness that even the Psalmist, an author being carried along by the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, struggled to assimilate these truths (as we will see in the coming verses).

II. Realities about God’s Activity (v. 12-22)

*12But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
you are remembered throughout all generations.*

*13You will arise and have pity on Zion;
it is the time to favor her;
the appointed time has come.*

*14For your servants hold her stones dear
and have pity on her dust.*

As the Psalmist realizes that he is bottoming out and portraying God in ways that he knows to be untrue, he wrestles to change his thinking. We see this in one of the famous transitions found throughout the Bible, “But you [God].” We see how much the tone changes as he struggles to renew his thinking. The pronounced change from the first person to third person pronouns is stark. He knows what he is saying is true (more true than what he has just said), but he is wrestling with these truths as if they are far off.

One of the most challenging aspects to these verses is that even while the Psalmist believes that God is angry with him, he does not forsake God as the source of his hope. The Psalmist has just said, “Lord, the

best guess I have about what is going on is that you spiked me like a football,” but does not turn his back on God. If we try to make this Psalm or suffering in general too “neat,” then we lose the impact of this.

As we seek to offer “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering,” we must allow ourselves to be challenged by their faith expressed in the fact that they are still asking questions. They are like Peter after Jesus culled the fair-weather masses with some particularly grotesque metaphors of the Christian life (John 6:53-65) who with his stomach turning and mind reeling replied:

John 6:68-69, “Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’”

There is great faith in staying put when you do not know where else to go. Like a lost child who does not just run randomly when lost in a public place is wise; our friend who does not forsake God when life makes no sense is courageous. By acknowledging this, we honor the presence of God’s sustaining grace in the life of our hurting friend and hopefully encourage them that they are doing “something right.”

*15 Nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory.*

*16 For the LORD builds up Zion;
he appears in his glory;*

If Daniel is the author of this Psalm, then he is beginning to draw upon his memory of God’s activity during other dark hours of his life. After Nebuchadnezzar’s own wise men feared to interpret a dream of dire consequence and Daniel spoke faithfully in spite of potential deadly consequences, Daniel has heard the king say:

Daniel 2:47, “The king answered and said to Daniel, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.”

After Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained faithful in spite of the threat of being cast into the fiery furnace, Daniel heard the king say:

Daniel 3:28-29, “Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.’”

Later, after being betrayed and having King Darius tricked into casting him into the Lion’s den, Daniel heard another king say:

Daniel 6:25-27, “Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: ‘Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom

shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.”

Yet even as Daniel clings to these memories, they seem too far removed from his current experience to be remembered in first person. But it does appear that these memories are a bit of a turning point in this Psalm. The tone of the Psalm from here to verse 22 does continually rise.

As we offer “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering,” we would do well to help our friends remember times of God’s faithfulness in their lives. God’s faithfulness is a key theme in the Gospel and one that can be verified with personal memory, not just biblical text. But as we reflect with our friend, let us again remember to be patient as we realize that it took time for even the great memories of Daniel to warm his discouraged heart.

*17 he regards the prayer of the destitute
and does not despise their prayer.*

While still referring to himself in third person (the destitute), the Psalmist is beginning to make some hopeful application. He is beginning to believe that God does care and that God does want to hear from him. Yet within this Psalm, this is as close as the Psalmist will get to finding personal comfort.

In our effort to offer “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering,” let us not underestimate the value in someone accepting that God cares and wants to listen to their suffering. In dark places the smallest lights (most fundamental truths) shine brightly. When our hurting friend makes a passing statement revealing an accurate view of God’s love, we should pause to point it out and savor it with them.

*18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD:
19 that he looked down from his holy height;
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,
20 to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die,*

As the mental and emotional prison of suffering begins to release Daniel, he becomes increasingly other-minded. Daniel is considering when his people will return to Jerusalem and tell his story from the holy temple mount. He begins to see value in his faithfulness even if it does not produce relief for him personally.

In this we see a countering of one of the more powerful effects of suffering – suffering tends to make our world very small. The longer we suffer the more our world gets reduced to the size of our pain, loss, or injustice. It is as if suffering produces a set of blinders on the sides of our faces that increasingly close out the rest of life until all we see, think about, or feel is our pain.

As the Psalmist recalls that God does hear his prayers and faithfulness has an eternal value that far outweighs the pain of suffering that is bound to our temporal bodies and this temporal world, he is tearing at those blinders. This battle to live for something more than present relief and enjoyment has always been hard, but particularly so in recent generations.

To help us see this I will use another illustration, this one historical. Our culture changed radically when the transcontinental railroad first provided a continuous vein of travel and commerce from sea to shining sea. The implication, however, was much larger than economic. The need for watches sky rocketed, especially in the Mid-West. Before the railroad people thought in terms of seasons (planting, Summer, harvest, and Winter), years, and generations (buying a piece of land meant blessing grandkids). After the railroad was built, people needed to know the hours of the day so they would be able to get their goods. With the advent of technology the units of time we consider important continues to shrink, until now if our cell phone takes more than a second to call up our e-mail *we* are ready to spike *it* like a football.

The significance of this change is that the smaller units of time we measure our life in, the more difficult it is to endure suffering. When pioneers thought in terms of generations, they would endure great hardship to change their family tree. When we measure life in moments, men and women will justify an affair because, “After all, doesn’t God want me to be happy?” because they are not thinking about their kids and the effects on generations of their family. When we shrink our world to these small units the only thing that makes sense is to fill each moment with as much pleasure as possible and empty each moment of as much suffering as possible.

As we offer “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering,” we must remember that the perspective from which the Gospel speaks is larger than the perspective we possess even on our best days. Like dried leather, if we try to stretch them too quickly we may break them. Daniel is two-thirds through his Psalm at this point. But in order to make sense of suffering, we do need a story that is longer than our lifetime and bigger than our personal dreams. As we make this appeal to our suffering friend, I think we can join them in being radically challenged by its implications.

*21 that they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD,
and in Jerusalem his praise,
22 when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.*

We can hear how this broader, other-minded perspective is bringing renewed energy to the Psalmist’s heart. Daniel’s thoughts move from Israel’s return to Jerusalem to his story being used to encourage God’s people, to many kingdoms gathering for the express purpose of praising God. To play a part in that, under any circumstances, satisfies the Psalmist’s heart. We have here a foreshadowing of the triumphal end of all things.

Revelation 7:9-11, “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God.”

As Daniel has the blinders of his suffering completely ripped from his eyes he is allowed to see how every act of faithfulness and obedience contributes to the Great Story of Redemption and brings glory to the One who is faithful in, through, and beyond all that Satan can destroy and disrupt through suffering. And we

wish that the Psalm stopped right here! But our battle with suffering does not end with the crescendo of an eternal perspective on our temporal suffering. The broader perspective must be lived with endurance often through continued suffering, and so the Psalm continues.

III. Comfort without “Answers” (v. 23-28)

*23 He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.*

*24 "O my God," I say, "take me not away
in the midst of my days—
you whose years endure
throughout all generations!"*

It is as if the Psalmist was so moved by the building worship of verses 18-22 that he tries to raise up in celebration only to have the intense pain of his condition drive him back to his bed. Having gotten his hope renewed only served to make this bout with suffering more devastating. So this Psalm, like life, does not fade off into “happily ever after.” But it’s not just chronic pain. It might be parents who lost a child coming home to an empty bedroom or having to face that birth date every year. Or the cancer patient who goes back every few months and faces the tests again. Or the faithful spouse who sees dozens of cars in the same make, model, and color of their spouse’s former lover and grows angrily nauseous.

In times like these we are tempted to return again to the “Why?!” questions because an “eternal perspective” just does not cut the pain. We beg God for our “Mr. Miagi moment.” If you remember the old Karate Kid movie, Daniel (this time not the prophet, but the runt) was getting picked on. He comes to Mr. Miagi to be taught karate. Mr. Miagi makes Daniel do all kinds of strange projects: waxing cars, painting fences, and a house. Daniel becomes exasperated and yells at Mr. Miagi. In the midst of Daniel’s tirade Mr. Miagi gets Daniel to make the motion of waxing the car as he throws a punch and it all becomes clear. Before Daniel was too weak for the correct motions to do any good. The awkward jobs were to build muscle. Now Daniel both knew the moves and had the strength to use them.

When we have learned a few lessons (karate moves) from our suffering we can get excited. But when suffering returns to dash our hopes and make our hearts sick (Prov. 13:12) we want to know what the powerful moment is that is going to make it all worth it. But like the Psalmist here, and Job before him, we often do not always get to connect those dots.

C.S. Lewis experienced something similar to this at the loss of his wife. He sat down to write a book (a comforting activity for a prolific author) in order to avoid being completely swept away by his grief. As he wrote he came to this conclusion:

In so far as this record was a defense against total collapse, a safety valve, it has done some good... I thought I could describe a *state*; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history.²

² C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 68-69.

Lewis wanted suffering and grief to be a country (maybe like Narnia) that could be mapped and, thereby, tamed. He did not mind playing the role of Lewis and Clarke (the great explorers of the American West) as long as he thought he could make the journey easier for others. Maps are created for things that everyone will experience in the same way. Suffering is not like that. The same tragedy can be told in dozen of stories. So C.S. Lewis, like the Psalmist in verses 18-22, realized that the only thing that could capture his suffering was his testimony – the story of his hardship told as a part and reflection on God’s greater story of redemption.

It is hard to tell if the Psalmist even realizes he is giving us such a story as he writes verses 23-24. But we read Psalm 102 and we respond, “Thank you. My heart does this too. My heart is moved to worship by the eternal perspective of the Gospel and then can be absolutely tanked by the return of suffering. If not for your story being shared, I would think I was a weak and bad Christian. I fall into thinking that God is against me. I build false stories around my suffering that distort God’s character and then I am reminded of God’s true nature only to fall and doubt again. You have given me words when I was ashamed to pray. You have helped me make sense of my life story. Thank you.”

We apply this in “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering” when we are not alarmed or offended when our suffering friend “relapses” into despair and their false story. That is the process by which we are sanctified. We have our false stories by which we make sense of life, influenced by our suffering and Satan’s lies. God gives us eyes to see and ears to hear His true story in which we live by His grace. We see for a moment and then our sight is blurred again by our suffering and Satan’s lies. Gospel-Driven counseling equips us to help our suffering friends see that they are not failing as they struggle (which would only multiply their despair).

*25Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
26They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,*

The Psalmist catches his breath again and begins trying to remind himself of God’s larger story once more. This time he starts with realizing how his fate is the same as the rest of creation. God made everything and “it was good.” But all creation is affected by the Fall and will be changed as an old robe for a new one. But the Gospel reminds that this change is not an exchange (as in discarding) but a transformation (making new). Peter, the New Testament apostle, gives us a clearer picture of the truth this Psalm presents.

2 Peter 3:11-13, “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

When this world and our life is all we know (and that is true of each one of us), then we are prone to believe that our situation is unique. If our suffering was truly unique, then no one (including God) could speak words of hope into our life. The Psalmist is having that lie broken as he pens these words. His suffering is not unique it is the common experience of every element and member of Creation.

When we seek to offer “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering” we must help our suffering friend connect their experience with the common experience of all Creation. But we dare not start there. This is the end of the Psalm and not the beginning. If we have not taken the time to get to know the unique facets and fears of our friend’s story, then our “true counsel” most likely will be received as an ill-timed generality that will harden our friend’s heart to the Gospel more than it serves as an ambassador cultivating trust for Christ.

27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.

*28 The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
their offspring shall be established before you.*

Ultimately, the Psalmists ends where the Gospel begins – the only hope that we have is the constancy of God’s character. Everything else that he has placed his trust in has been stripped from him. He realizes that ultimately suffering has been defeated. God will bring his children to dwell securely, but that will happen in the new heavens and new earth, not this one. It has been a long journey for the Psalmist to reach this truth (as it is for each of us), but without the journey we would not be transformed by and fully rest in this truth.

Same Journey; Different Traveler

Before we draw some final observations, it would be helpful to see that it is not just Daniel or the Psalms that take this journey. This Gospel-journey through suffering is one that is traveled many times in the course of Scripture and countless times in the life of Christians.

Another place that we see this same pattern is in the prophet Jeremiah’s testimony in Lamentations 3:4-26. Take the time to read it slowly as you consider the material we have covered. Notice how verses 4-20 parallel the suffering of Psalm 102:1-11. Hear that Jeremiah has to remind himself of the foundational truths of the Gospel during his suffering. His story is our story. What suffering caused him to doubt our suffering causes us to doubt. His God who brought Israel out of captivity is our God who sent Christ so that ultimately “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Like Jeremiah, Daniel, and all God’s people we struggle with the waiting.

*4 He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;
he has broken my bones;*

*5 he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;*

*6 he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.*

*7 He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has made my chains heavy;*

*8 though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;*

*9 he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones;
he has made my paths crooked.*

10 He is a bear lying in wait for me,

a lion in hiding;

¹¹he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;

¹²he bent his bow and set me
as a target for his arrow.

¹³He drove into my kidneys
the arrows of his quiver;

¹⁴I have become the laughingstock of all peoples,
the object of their taunts all day long.

¹⁵He has filled me with bitterness;
he has sated me with
wormwood.

¹⁶He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;

¹⁷my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;

¹⁸so I say, "My endurance has perished;
so has my hope from the LORD."

¹⁹Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!

²⁰My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.

*²¹But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:*

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;

²³they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.

²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

Take each of the clauses from verse 22 forward and examine how your suffering has caused you to doubt the same things that suffering caused Daniel and Jeremiah to doubt, but have proven true through generations of Christian testimonies.

- The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases
- His mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning

- Great is your faithfulness
- "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."
- The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him
- It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

Gospel-Driven Counseling v. Self-Help

Now we will take just a moment to contrast how “Gospel-Driven Counseling for Suffering” differs from modern self-help. The goal is not to be negative or combative with our counseling neighbors, but assist believers to see more clearly how the Gospel equips us to be “salt and light” (Matt. 5:13-16) in our culture and to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have in Christ (I Pet. 3:15). We will draw three comparisons.

First, the Gospel is to be lived out in a dynamic, open, redemptive community. In many of the secular alternatives you join a community based upon your struggle and often if you overcome your struggle you lose your community. Because support groups are rarely attached to something larger, there is nothing to cultivate community beyond the struggle.

The Gospel is lived out in the larger community of the church. Those that walk with you through your suffering and you with them through their suffering are a part of the same covenant fellowship. Long after you grieve or process another type of trauma your companions are with you and a part of your story without requiring you to maintain your suffering as your identity.

Second, the Gospel has a more complete ending than “acceptance.” In the most common secular conception of grief by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. There are four challenging steps down into suffering and then one big step back out of it. In this case the struggle-to-hope ratio is 4 to 1. As with many descriptive sciences, this model is better at giving you something that resonates with your experience than it is giving remedies. You are left with the same question you start with, “How do I come to grips (“accept”) my loss?”

The problem with the secular model is that it assigns you the tasks of creating a story big and powerful enough to explain and transform your suffering. No man-made story or “god of our understanding” can do that. The Gospel is the only story that is big and powerful (and true) enough to explain and transform our suffering. However well-intentioned it may be, self-help fails because it is trying to tackle a God-sized dilemma with man-sized solutions.

Third, self-help fails because it treats peace as a thing to be found or made rather than a Person to have a relationship with and be protected by. In self-help it is peace that is lost and us who must find it. In the Gospel it is we who are lost and Peace who finds us (and we surrender to).

Self-help will always call us to be our own master, story-writer, and protector. The Gospel is superior because it allows us to be merely children of God. The great sting of suffering is that it reveals to us how much bigger life is than we are. There is nothing self-help can offer that imbalance. Only the Gospel brings us under the protection of the One who is bigger than life.