Most of you probably know the name Francis Chan. He’s a very popular author and pastor who led a church in Simi Valley, California for about 16 years that had around 5000 people attending.

What many people don’t know about Francis Chan is that in April 2010 he resigned as the pastor of that church. He said he left because he felt convicted that a church where only a few used their spiritual gifts while so many sat idle and just watched wasn’t how church was meant to be. So he started looking for a better, more biblical model of church.

Over the next year he traveled all over the world visiting churches in other countries, most of them house churches. One in particular was a house church movement in China that began with five pillars, five things they wanted their church to be all about and to exemplify.

The first three were things you would expect: being committed to prayer, being committed to the word of God, and being committed to sharing the Gospel. The fourth was a regular expectation of miracles because of their commitment to the first three and what they expected of the Holy Spirit. That one might be a little out of our comfort zone, but the last one is really tough to get our minds around. The fifth thing they wanted to be all about as a church was to embrace suffering for the glory of Christ.

They included suffering in the plan for what their church was going to do and be. It was something they expected to happen. They wanted to be prepared to embrace and endure that suffering for the glory of God.

Why would they do that? Why would they expect and embrace suffering? Isn’t that the kind of thing that we would do almost anything to avoid? Not according to the New Testament.

**1 Peter 4:12–13 ESV — 12** Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13** But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Peter not only tells us to expect suffering, he tells us to rejoice in it. And it’s not just Peter. There are Scriptures all through the New Testament, and from Jesus himself, that tell us to expect to suffer as followers of Christ, and how to handle it.

That’s what I’d like to talk about with you today. It’s not an easy topic by any means, but it’s an important one. We’re in a series about the Spiritual Disciplines right now. We’re talking about the things we can put into practice that help transform us into being a little more like Jesus all the time. There are a lot of different lists of spiritual disciplines out there. Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* is a really popular one. Dallas Willard wrote a book called *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. And lots of other people have written about the disciplines and made these lists of all the things we can practice to help us in this process of discipleship.

Here’s the thing: you probably aren’t going to find suffering on any of those lists. I’ve read a bunch of books and articles and other things on the subject, and I’ve never seen it mentioned before. So why are we talking about suffering in the middle of a series on spiritual disciplines? Because according to the Bible, suffering is one of the things that helps us become more like Jesus. Paul talks a lot about sharing in the sufferings of Christ. James and Paul both talk about what suffering does for us and what God can do through those things in our lives.

When we started this series, we defined the spiritual disciplines as the things that we do that place us before God so that he can change and transform our hearts to look more like Jesus. Suffering is one of those things that does exactly that.

What does that suffering look like?

**Philippians 1:29–30 ESV — 29** For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, **30** engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

It almost sounds like Paul is saying to the Philippians that they are privileged to be able to suffer for the sake of Christ. Like its a blessing for them. But that can’t be it, can it? It turns out that’s exactly what Paul means. The word he uses for granted is the Greek word χαρίζομαι (charizomai) It’s the same root word as the word for grace. So this word means to give graciously. It has been graciously given them to the Philippians to suffer for Christ. And Paul serves as their example, and ours, of what that looks like.

When Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus he had a reputation for imprisoning and killing Christians. So when God told Ananias, a Christian leader in Damascus to go to Paul, he was afraid.

**Acts 9:15–16 ESV — 15** But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. **16** For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Paul knew from the beginning how much he was going to suffer for the sake of Christ, but he did it anyway.

**2 Corinthians 11:24–28 ESV — 24** Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; **26** on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; **27** in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. **28** And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

The things that Paul went through would cause most people to drop everything and call it quits. I think most people would probably have walked away after being stoned and left for dead outside the city gates. But not Paul. Paul endured through all of that and yet remained faithful. This is what he said to the Philippians that he told it was a privilege to suffer for Christ:

**Philippians 3:7–11 ESV — 7** But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **8** Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— **10** that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul suffered a lot for the sake of the Gospel. More than most. But Christians have suffered for their faith in Christ no matter what time period they lived in, no matter which government they lived under. Christians have been persecuted and killed for their faith in every century. You would think that would be better now in 2019, nearly 2000 years after the church first started and with around 1/3 of the world professing to be Christian people.

The sad part is not only is it not better, but the persecution of Christians around the world is actually worse today than it has been ever before in history. More Christians are arrested, tortured, and killed for their faith today than ever before. Our world hasn’t become an easier place to follow Jesus, in most ways it has become harder than ever. The suffering of Christians has only increased as the centuries have passed by.

But what about us? We aren’t facing prison sentences or executions based on our belief in Jesus. At least not yet. We don’t have to be afraid that when we gather here that the police will come and raid our services and haul people off to prison. At least not yet. We don’t have to be afraid that the government will decide on a whim that it’s time to demolish our building because we worship Jesus here. At least not yet. By the way that very thing happened in China just two weeks ago.

Our suffering here in a country that affords us the freedom to worship is on a different level. At least for now. But we do still face suffering. We face being humiliated by others because of our faith. We face being shunned from social circles because we don’t conform to the culture around us. We face being scorned and hated because we hold to biblical truth in a world that wants to let everyone make up their own truth.

But not all of our suffering comes because of our faith. Not all of it comes from other people. We face the same kinds of suffering that every person in history has faced. We suffer things like losing our jobs and not knowing how we’re going to provide for our families. We struggle to make ends meet and worry about how we will pay the bills. We suffer broken relationships that seem like they will never heal. We suffer when those closest to us betray us or abandon us. We suffer when people are cruel and unjust to us.

We suffer when we get the results of a test and hear that awful word, cancer. We suffer even more when we watch someone we love get a diagnosis like that, or even something worse. We suffer when we know the end is coming for those we love the most. We suffer when the end of this life does come for our loved ones. We suffer when the excitement of a baby on the way turns to sorrow with a miscarriage.

The list goes on and on. The things we struggle through, the things we suffer, are almost endless. Suffering like that is not just something we go through as Christians. Suffering is something that we go through as human beings. Every one of us will suffer with different things at different times. We know that suffering is going to come. The difference between someone who follows Jesus and someone who doesn’t is how they respond to that suffering. So how should we respond to suffering as disciples of Jesus?

**1. First, we Rejoice**

Peter said it in 1 Peter 4

**James 1:2–4 ESV — 2** Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, **3** for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. **4** And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

How many of you read this verse and just come away saying, “How? How am I supposed to count it joy when I suffer and go through these trials in my life?” Here’s what you need to know. The joy is not because of the suffering. If you are joyful when you suffer because you like to suffer, then we have some counseling services available downstairs. Seriously, if suffering itself is something you enjoy, there is something really wrong.

The joy is not because of the suffering. The joy that James is talking about here is because of what happens after, what happens as a result. Last week we talked about confession. Confession is not fun. Confession is scary and it makes us realize the depth of our brokenness. Confession is a sorrowful thing, but it ends in joy because of the forgiveness that comes at the end. It ends in joy because there is a loving and gracious God on the other side.

Suffering is the same way. Suffering is never fun. Suffering is not something anyone wants to do. Suffering is not something that you should want in your life. But on the other side of suffering is a God who comforts, a God who gives peace, and a God who uses that suffering in us to produce the kind of holiness that he desires to see in us.

Jesus is our example here. When Jesus was about to go to the cross, he knew exactly what lay ahead of him. He went to the Garden of Gethsemane and spent the night in prayer to God. He asked God for another way to do what he had to do. But ultimately he was obedient and submissive. He went to the cross willingly, knowing everything he was going to suffer as he went.

**Hebrews 12:1–2 ESV — 1** ...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **2** 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.

Jesus knew what was coming. He knew the suffering he would have to go through, and yet he endured it for the joy that was set before him. Jesus didn’t find joy in the cross itself. He despised it. He despised the shame that came with it, the humiliation he would have to endure. But he endured all of that so that he would know the joy on the other side.

The word James uses there when he talks about testing is the word δοκίμιον (dokimion) which is a word that means to test or prove genuine. In the first century this was a word that spoke of the kind of testing or refining a silversmith would carry out on the silver so that it was free of impurities.

He would heat the silver until the impurities floated to the top, and then he would skim off all the junk and do it again. The silver had to be heated over and over again until all the impurities were gone. The way the silversmith knew he was done with the process was when he could look that the melted silver and see his perfect reflection in the surface like a mirror.

That’s what God does with us. He uses these trials and the things that we suffer through to melt us down, to refine us so that he can skim away the impurities. But to do that he has to refine us over and over and over again.

If you’ve ever wondered why God let’s bad things happen to good people, it’s so that he can use those things to make them better. God wants to be able to look down one day and see his reflection in us. We were all made in the image and likeness of God. We will reflect the image of God more and more as He refines us and skims away the impurities of our lives.

We’re in the book of James right now in our Bible study and one of the things that we’ve talked about over and over is that God desires our holiness more than he desires our happiness. It’s great when those things coincide, but the good times when everything is going great are not how God refines us. God uses the refining fires of the trials and suffering we go through to make us more holy.

**Romans 8:28 ESV — 28** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

How many times have you read that passage and thought that it didn’t seem like God was working for your good because of all the suffering you were going through at the time? May I suggest to you that God has a different definition of what is good than we do? We think of good as things are going well, nobody in my family is sick right now, I have a stable job, steady income, all our needs and wants are provided for, and we have a little nest egg in case things go sideways. That’s not God’s definition of good. That’s not God’s purpose for us.

**Ephesians 4:12–13 (NIV) — 12** so that the body of Christ may be built up **13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

That’s God’s purpose for us. That’s what he wants for us. He want us to keep working, to keep following after him, to keep enduring the sufferings and trials that we go through so that he can use them to refine us and get us a little closer to attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

**2. Endure**

If we want to attain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, if we are going to allow God to continue to refine us, we have to endure the sufferings and trials that come our way.

**Matthew 10:16–22 ESV — 16** “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. **17** Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, **18** and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. **19** When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. **20** For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. **21** Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, **22** and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Jesus said there was going to be a lot of suffering, a lot of pain, a lot of trials that would come for those who would believe in him. But in order to make it to the finish line, in order to hold on to our faith through all those trials, we have to endure.

How many people have you known who were faithful followers of Jesus until something went wrong. Maybe they found out they had a terminal illness. Maybe a loved one died. Maybe they lost their job. Maybe they were treated poorly by Christians or by the church at some point. Have you ever heard anyone say, “I can’t believe in a God who would let that happen to me.” If we give up following Jesus when our trials and sufferings come, then we let our enemy win.

God doesn’t cause our sufferings and trials. Our enemy throws sufferings and trials at us to wear us down and get us to abandon our faith in God. God takes what was meant for evil and uses it for our good. For his definition of our good. To make us more holy and conform us to the image of Christ. If we let him. God is faithful to do that in us as long as we are faithful to endure to the other end.

**3. Seek Comfort from God**

**2 Corinthians 1:3–5 ESV — 3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, **4** who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. **5** For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

The God who uses our trials to mold and shape us, who refines us like a silversmith would. He also knows how much it hurts. He knows how much the kind of suffering we go through hurts our hearts, because he was here. He went through more suffering than any of us will ever know on the cross. But don’t forget that since Jesus was human, he also went through all the suffering that every human does. Since Jesus knows what it’s like to suffer the way that we suffer, he knows exactly how to comfort us. He knows exactly the kind of love, and peace, and encouragement, and building up we need when we are in the midst of a trial. And he provides those things for us.

**4. Hope**

**Romans 5:3–5 ESV —**  **3** Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, **4** and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, **5** and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Again, Paul doesn’t rejoice because he is suffering, he rejoices because of what comes after. He knows that suffering is going to produce that endurance he needs, then character, and with that character a hope of eternal life. Just like Jesus said, those who endure will be saved.

**2 Corinthians 4:7–11, 14, 16-18 ESV — 7** But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. **8** We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; **9** persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; **10** always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. **11** For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh... **14** knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence... **16** So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. **17** For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, **18** as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

This life is full of suffering of all kinds. Some of it is just because we’re human, and some of it will come because we follow after Jesus. None of it is in vain because God uses it to refine us and make us more like Christ. But we also have to remember this. Even though it might be the hardest thing to hear in the midst of our trial, our time here is only temporary. Even if it is a lifetime of suffering here on earth, it is a blink of an eye compared to the time we will spend with Jesus in eternity.

James calls our life a mist. It’s fleeting and temporary. What happens here and what we go through matter. But they are not final. They are not eternal. Those of us who have an eternal home with Jesus need to keep our eyes fixed on that, even in the midst of our sufferings.

Our enemy uses those things to try to drag our attention and our focus back down to earth. He wants us to focus on those things that make life miserable sometimes. Don’t let him do that.

**Romans 8:18 ESV — 18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

We have a hope, an assurance of an eternal life spent with the one who gave his life for us on the cross. The way that Paul talks about hope is not, “Boy, I sure hope that happens one day.” It’s something we can be certain of. It’s something we look forward to with hopeful expectation. No matter what we suffer in this life, we still have the hope of eternal life with Jesus. That still trumps everything we experience here in this life.

No matter what kinds of things you face, no matter what you suffer, never take your eyes off Jesus. Never let go of that hope of eternity with him. That is our solid rock and firm foundation when it feels like everything else is crumbling around us.

I’d like to close by telling you the story of a family I’ve come to admire very much in the last several months. Ben and Crystal Woods are friends of some people Beth and I went to school with, and the dad is a pastor at a church in Southern Indiana. They have three kids, Ezra, Calla, and Lilah. On May 19 of this year, they took Calla into the ER with migraines and flu symptoms. After doing some tests, they found out that their nine year old little girls had multiple tumors in her brain and had a very rare aggressive type of brain cancer.

You can imagine the struggle they went through sitting by the hospital bed, waiting for news, praying for the right doctors and the right treatments. They set up a Facebook page to update everyone on how things were going. Through all the things this little nine year old girl said, it was obvious she was in love with Jesus and had complete faith in him. On July 10 she lost her earthly battle with cancer and went home to be with Jesus, less than two months after they found out that she was sick.

They said that Calla was a note writer. They would find little notes all over the house, her dad’s office, the cars, that were always signed your favorite child, Calla. The last note she ever wrote her dad said, “Dad, I love you! You are the best dad ever. I will see you when you get home. Love Calla.”

After she went home to be with Jesus, her parents wrote this:

“I am learning that while living in the wake of intense suffering, the Truth still holds me. The ground is firm. God is strong enough to sustain and support me, even in the darkest time. He carries me. He grieves with me. He is gently whispering Hope into my soul.

And, my friend, this ground is strong enough for you on your darkest day too. I feel a burden to report to each of you who have so compassionately entered into this pain through the words Benjamin and I  have shared here: even in the worst moments of life, God is still able to sustain you. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart...Jesus has overcome the world.

This world and all its troubles and diseases and disappointments and wounds and disasters and separations will end. And in its place, a new, beautiful, perfect one will descend from the skies. This new world is our true home...what our souls were created for. And the invitation to be a part of this paradise is open through Jesus and only Jesus. His arms are open to you, and I can attest to this truth: You can trust Him.

Decide who Jesus is to you. Decide today...decide before the storm hits, before the darkness camps around you, before life shakes you to your core. Allow Him to be the immovable

foundation that sustains you in the worst calamity. He is strong enough for it all, and He is near through it all...an ever-present help in trouble.

Deliverance is coming. Darkness won’t last forever. Decide today whom you belong to...decide where you belong.

Because friends...Home is on the horizon.  Come, Lord Jesus!!”

I can’t imagine the kind of pain and grief those parents are wading through right now. But they haven’t lost sight of what matters for eternity. They haven’t lost sight of the one who died for them. They haven’t lost sight of what is eternal over what is temporary. They haven’t lost sight of the hope we have in Christ. That’s what it looks like to respond to suffering as a follower of Jesus.