

COVENANT

“DOING & SUFFERING”

- Week 3 -

Welcome to week 3 of our journey on surrendering control of our lives to God. We began Week 1 talking about the core issue: simply, that we *really* like control. We think it gives us a sense of comfort and security. But, in reality, it's often an illusion, and that sense of stability can be taken away from us in a heartbeat. So what do we do? Well, first, it helps to understand that our lives aren't ours to control anyway. Everything we have is a gift from God, and when we give our lives over to God, we can enjoy a sense of peace on the journey. Last week, we started getting specific, talking about surrendering the control we try to maintain in our professional lives, with our jobs and finances... an area that often feels out of our control, because it often *is* out of our control. But God has promised to provide for us, and, therefore, we can give our worry over to God.

Today, we're going to look at another specific area in life that causes us anxiety, and what is promised from God's side of the Covenant. But, first... let's get the conversational mojo going.

Question 1: You find a magic lamp in the attic of your home. Upon rubbing it, (cuz, let's be honest, you know you'd try it,) a genie pops out and grants you one wish. What do you wish for and why? Please assume all other Aladdin rules apply.

We tend to pray wrong. Or rather, we have a misunderstanding of what prayer is. Many people view prayer like they view a magic lamp, as if God is some cosmic genie that is supposed to wave His wand and grant us wishes. A complete discourse on what prayer actually is, and how to do it, is a different series for a different time, but suffice to say, the prayer that we've been following in this series is about to get real... and doesn't follow the magic-lamp-genie-wish model of prayer.

Each line of this prayer is a beautiful reminder for us of that Covenant we have with God. The first line was the basis of this whole deal, that our lives aren't ours to control anyway. We are God's.

I am no longer my own, but thine.

The prayer then got more focused, addressing specific areas in life where we need to trust God, specifically the need to give God control of our professional lives.

**Put me to what thou wilt,
rank me with whom thou wilt.**

But now, as we continue talking about specific areas in our lives where our control is tenuous at best and causes some serious anxiety, the prayer takes a tough turn:

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Wait, what?! Am I really supposed to be praying for suffering? Yeah, this *really* isn't the magic-wish-genie-in-a-bottle model, is it? Nope. But, this is the very reason this prayer is so powerful, and so necessary for our understanding of giving God control of *every* aspect of our lives. If we only pray for God to have control of the easy stuff, asking God to just give us what we want, we're falling short in our half of the Covenant... giving our *entire* lives to God.

Question 2: This is our weekly "Scale of 1 to 10," question... How worried are you about something bad happening in your life? Are you a go-with-the-flow, "I'm going to enjoy the moment and not worry about the future" person? Or are you a worrier, an "always waiting for the shoe to drop" person? And why?

Here's how we want to understand this line of the prayer. It's bad theology to think God enjoys making us suffer so as to test us or teach us something and, therefore, we should pray for it to happen. God doesn't cause bad things to happen to us. So, take a deep breath... praying the line, "put me to suffering," doesn't mean you're asking for it. Rather, view this line of the prayer not as an invitation, but rather as a recognition and a relinquishing. It is a recognition that you are aware that bad things are just a part of the crazy world we live in, and it is a way to say you relinquish control of the outcome of that dark time in your life. "God, when I'm 'doing' and things are good, I'm yours. When I'm suffering, and things aren't good, I'm still yours."

Someone who knew all about this "up and down" nature of life was a follower of Jesus named Peter. His name was actually Simon, but Jesus gave him the nickname Peter, which means, "The Rock." (Sweet nickname, right??) Peter was to be "The Rock" upon which the new church, Christianity, was built. So, in the first century Roman Empire, Peter and the other disciples were setting up Christian communities all over the Mediterranean. He's suffered persecution from the Romans. He's watched these communities suffer along with him. He would eventually die for what he believes. So when it comes to suffering, Peter knows what he's talking about. In the Bible, we find a letter he wrote to one of these churches wanting to offer them hope. He writes,

¹⁰ In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation. (1 Peter 5:10 NLT)

As we've talked about each week, a Covenant has two sides: what is required of us, and what God promises in return. So, first, our side. When it comes to suffering, from this scripture, the only instruction we're given is to "share in his eternal glory." That's good news, right? Maybe the only thing we're supposed to do in the midst of our tough times is to endure, to hope, to let God have the reigns and, like we said the first week, trust him with the outcome. The scripture begins by saying, "in his kindness..." Kindness doesn't require a repayment... if it did, it wouldn't be kindness. The things God promises to do in the midst of our suffering don't require anything on our part except to trust that they're coming.

Question 3: When things go wrong, what makes it hard for you to have hope? What makes it difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel? What helps?

Suffering sucks. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to be angry. It's okay to feel what you feel. It's okay to be *not* okay. It's even okay to be angry with God. God can handle it. And the suffering we endure in life has many different causes: the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, a life-changing health diagnosis, tension between significant others or family or friends, ridicule, mental illness, low self-worth... the list goes on and on of the things that can cause us pain in this life.

But this scripture reminds us of God's side of the Covenant. There are three words right in the middle that can help give us hope during our suffering... "restore, support, and strengthen". This is an amazing image of what God does for us in our tough times. First, as we are suffering, God promises us support... letting us know that God is walking with us through the valley. Sometimes the best way to get through a difficult time is to have a friend who says, "I don't know how we'll get out of this yet, but I'm with you." God makes that very promise, saying, "you don't see how this is going to end yet, but I'm right here with you."

Second, God offers us strength in that weakness. When you find yourself in a time of suffering, ask God for strength. Sometimes, you only have the strength to put one foot in front of the other, one step at a time. In the worst cases, just putting on pants and leaving the house is a huge win. But pray for the strength that God promises as we suffer. "God, help me deal with my co-workers in this time of uncertainty." "God, give me the strength to not kill my ex." "God, I can't see how I will ever put my life back together without my loved one... help me take it one breath at a time."

And finally, I love the first word Peter uses, "restore." We have an HGTV God. God loves to take broken, worn-down, weathered and withered things, and perform a restoration in them. Often when we are in a time of suffering in our lives, that's exactly how we feel... broken and worn-down, weathered and withered. Peter reminds us that, if we allow it, God can take our brokenness and restore us.

Question 4: If you're comfortable doing so, share a time when you went through a period of suffering. What went wrong? What gave you hope? What was the outcome? Where did you see God working in or after it? Or, if you're feeling brave, share a current struggle. Allow the group to offer support and encouragement.

As we pray the Wesley Covenant Prayer to close today, remember, this line of the prayer is not an invitation for bad things to happen. It's simply a recognition that they will, and a relinquishing of control when they do. When you get to this line, imagine yourself saying, "God, when things are going well, I'm yours. But when things inevitably fall apart, I'm still yours then, too." At the end, do two things. First, if anyone offered a struggle they're currently going through, have someone pray for them, asking God for support, strength, and restoration in the midst of their suffering. And second, allow a time of silence to pray for those things for yourself and your own struggles... knowing that God loves to put back together our brokenness, setting us again on a firm foundation.

Let us pray:

**I am no longer my own but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt,
rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for thee,
or laid aside for thee.
Let me be exalted for thee,
or brought low for thee.
Let me have all things,
let me have nothing.
Let me be full,
let me be empty.
I freely and humbly yield all things
to thy pleasure and thy disposal.
And now, sweet Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
I am thine and thou art mine.
And may this covenant made on Earth,
be ratified in heaven.
So be it.**