

Pastor Spencer Martin
Suffering Shapes You

March 29, 2026
Series: The Rescue
Romans 5:1-11

**BIG IDEA - THROUGH CHRIST, WE DON'T JUST GET
FORGIVENESS, WE GET ONGOING ACCESS TO GOD**

"How is this big church going to care for me?" That's a reasonable question that I'm sure many of you have asked. The reason that is such a reasonable question is because large churches, historically, have not done a very good job of caring for people, of walking alongside their members through sin and suffering.

Well, something we believe deeply here is that care happens in community. To be more specific, we believe care happens in Community Groups. The majority of care that you're going to need in the life of this church is going to be met in the Community Group setting.

Did you notice in that video that one of the things Cassie said was that they did not get connected to a Community Group until they first got connected to Two Cities Church? We understand that so many people are not going to get connected to community here until they first walk in the doors of our church, which is why Easter is such an incredible opportunity.

Did you know there was a study done years ago that found that 82 percent of people would agree to go to church with someone if they were invited by a friend or a family member? Here's what that means: the barrier for most people is not the church; the barrier is simply not being asked. So, I just want to encourage you. Would you take advantage of this opportunity to invite someone to join you for Easter? It's such a special opportunity.

Now, just to be clear, we're not saying this because we really want to have a lot of people here and it'll be exciting. That's not it. It's that we believe our Easter services at all of our campuses are going to be incredible opportunities for people to be able to hear the gospel and respond. Best of all, Pastor Kyle has assured me he's going to be on his best behavior throughout all of our Easter services. So, let's take a moment to pray for our Easter services and that the Lord would move in an incredible way through them.

Lord, I thank you for the opportunity we have over the next week to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. I think about how many of us in this room... We have people we love. We have people we're connected with who do not have hope. We believe there's nothing more hopeful than the resurrection of Jesus.

So, Lord, I pray that you would give each of us a lot of courage, a lot of wisdom, and a lot of discernment when it comes to how we navigate those gospel risks, those gospel invitations to join us at church. Lord, I pray that you would move in an incredible way here in the life of our church, but also in the Easter services at all of the faithful, gospel-preaching churches in this city. We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.

Well, over the years, Pastor Kyle has given me a wide variety of sensitive, delicate, and even controversial topics to preach on. I've had to get up here before and talk about sexual immorality. I've had to talk about God's judgment. I've had to get up here and talk about how other religions are false and talk about money. In fact, after one of those services, someone came up to me one time and said, "Why did Pastor Kyle give you that topic? Is this some kind of pastoral hazing going on?"

Well, I am in a fantastic mood today because the passage I get to preach on might be the happiest passage in all the New Testament. So, whether you're here, whether you're down in Lexington, or at our Multiply Campus, grab your Bibles and flip to Romans, chapter 5. What we're going to see in Romans, chapter 5, is that the apostle Paul is going to start to walk through the benefits that come from following Jesus.

Now, we love to talk about things that have great benefits. Right? Whenever you get a job, what's the first thing you want to know after the salary? You want to know how good the benefits are. "What's the paternity leave like? What's the PTO policy like? How good is the health insurance? What is my ability to work from home?" We want to know all about our benefits.

Some of you love to brag about the benefits of your credit card you pay for. I personally am a big fan of the YMCA benefits. They have great coffee. There are a lot of activities. Maybe best of all, they have childcare there for up to two hours at a time. We love these benefits.

What Paul is going to do in Romans 5 is he is going to walk through the benefits of following Jesus. In Christian circles, it's interesting that we tend to talk a lot about the cost of following Jesus, and we *should* do that, but what Paul is going to do today is talk about the benefits of following Jesus. There are four of them. I'll give them to you right now.

The first is *peace with God*. The second is *access to God*. The third benefit is *purpose in your pain*. Then, the fourth is *hope for your future*. Now, I'm hoping this message is going to be timely for many of you, because when you hear those four things listed off, you start to think to yourself that you feel the exact opposite of many of those things.

Some of you, instead of feeling like you have peace with God, you think about your life, and you feel like there's not much at all that's peaceful. Your marriage, your relationship with your kids, your workplace, your mind...not peaceful. For some of you, you hear "Access to God," and you feel like God is far off. You feel like God is unapproachable. Others of you, instead of feeling like you have purpose in your pain, might be thinking that your pain is pointless. And some of you, instead of feeling like you have hope for your future, you are just feeling very fearful.

So, I believe this passage in Romans, chapter 5, is going to be a great encouragement to all of us. So, let's start with Romans, chapter 5, verse 1. This is where Paul is going to switch from argumentation to adoration. He says in verse 1, a very well-known verse, ***"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."***

There are four different "therefores" in the book of Romans. When Paul says "Therefore" in verse 1, the big conclusion is that because we have been justified by faith, that means we now have practical benefits. Charles Spurgeon, the great London preacher from the 1800s, basically said, "Oh, what a word...*therefore*...the great connector between doctrine and doxology," which is a praise to God.

"The apostle Paul has labored through four chapters, building his case like a master architect. Now he throws open the door and cries, 'Come in! Come in and see what all this means for you.' The *therefore* of Romans 5 is the front door of the mansion of Christian privilege."

You see, the first benefit of following Jesus is *peace with God*. The gospel, the heart of Christianity, is made super clear in verse 1 when Paul tells us it is those who have been justified by faith who have peace with God. J.I. Packer has a definition of faith. He says *faith* is self-abandoning hope in the person and work of Jesus.

What this means, to put it very plainly, is if you have faith in Jesus, in his life, in his death, and in his resurrection, then you are justified. You are fully forgiven and accepted as righteous. Now, an important question to ask is...*What is the difference between peace with God and the peace of God?* Well, here's a helpful way to think about it. Peace *with* God is a fact; the peace *of* God is a feeling.

So, if you have peace with God, that is an objective reality. Instead of there being hostility or (another biblical word) enmity between you and God, there is now peace. You can think of it as there's a ceasefire. There has been a peace treaty between you and God. That's peace *with* God. It is a fact.

Now, the peace *of* God is a feeling. The principle here is that your feelings need to be rooted in facts. We do not need to root our beliefs in what we feel, because something you know to be true is there's often a massive difference between what you feel and what is actually real.

It has been about five years since I was practicing as a PA in gastroenterology. I used to see both sides of the spectrum all the time. On one side of things, I used to have patients come in, and they were totally convinced that something was seriously wrong and that they had a serious problem, even if there wasn't a problem.

So, they'd come in, and they would be worried they had cancer, or something, so we'd get some labs or a scan or do a procedure, or whatever, and then all of those things would come back normal. I would say, "Hey, good news. This is normal." Then people would say to me, "Well, I just really think something is wrong. I think I have a blockage." To which I was like, "Ma'am, you don't have a blockage. I promise. You have IBS," which is a real problem. Some of you are like, "This is too personal. Let's move on."

So, on one side of things, sometimes people think there's something seriously wrong and it's not wrong. On the other side of things, I would have patients come in who were like, "Yeah, my wife wants me to come get checked out. I don't think anything is going on. I've got a little bit of vague abdominal pain. I'm getting full a little more quickly." Then you get a CT scan on *that* person, and it comes back, and it's cancer.

The point here is that reality is way more important than what you feel. One of the benefits of the Christian life is when you feel something that's not true, you can remind yourself of the facts of what God's Word has said is true. You might feel like your sexual sin has ruined your future. You might feel like your sexual sin has damaged you forever, but the fact is that forgiveness and healing are possible.

You might feel like God is getting tired of you asking him to soften the heart of a friend or to restore a broken relationship, but the fact is that God is a good father who wants

his children to ask. He's not tired of you asking. Some of you might feel like your value is tied up in your career or your grades or maybe in how good of a mom you are, but the fact is your identity and value, if you are in Christ, is in who God says you are in Christ.

The big idea of verse 1 is that full forgiveness, objective peace with God, is available through faith in Jesus. Now what we're going to see in verse 2 is the second benefit of following Jesus, which is *access to God*. Verse 2 says, **"Through him [Jesus] we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."** Now, notice here that it says grace is something you stand in. It's not a one-time benefit.

If you have access to something, by definition, what that means is you have the ability to approach and enjoy something. We love having access to all sorts of things. Right? We love having access to good schools. We love having access to influential people. Some of you love to have access to your parents' YouTube TV account. College students love to figure out how to maintain access to their parents' bank account for as long as possible. We love access.

What it means to have access to God is that you have the ongoing, permanent ability to approach and enjoy him. You can talk to God at any time. A friend of mine is a primary care physician for executives all over the country. I don't know exactly how it all works, but what I do know is one of the benefits of being his patient is you can call him at any time and he has to answer. These companies pay big money so their executives can have 24/7 access to their primary care provider.

Tim Keller has a great quote on this. He says no one would dare to wake up a king in the middle of the night for a glass of water other than the king's child, and Tim Keller says that we, as Christians, have that same kind of access. So, a word for some of you might be that God is not far off, that God is not annoyed by you.

Hebrews 4:16 says, **"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace..."** First Peter 5:7 says, **"...casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."** So, you might need to stop feeling guilty about asking God for things. It is okay for you to be honest with God about the desires of your heart because you have full, unhindered, ongoing access.

Now, let's keep going. We're going to get to the third benefit of following Jesus, which is *purpose in your pain*. We're going to read verses 3-5. Then we're going to spend a while here because these are super important.

"Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope

does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit... That's the first time the Holy Spirit is mentioned in Romans. ***"...who has been given to us."***

Now, here's a quick, interesting fact that we see in these first five verses. We see a Trinitarian structure. I want to show you this. It says in verse 1 we have peace with God the Father through Jesus Christ, with God's love being poured out by the Holy Spirit in verse 5. What that means is that all three persons of the Trinity are active in both our salvation and its benefits.

In verses 3-5, we're also given a chain reaction. Each of these stages are fuel for the next stage. We're told in verse 3 that we rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces endurance. Here's what that means, to put it very simply: *suffering shapes you*. We understand that sometimes suffering will shape you in good ways. Sometimes it's in not-so-good ways. Sometimes it's both. Sometimes it's hard to know.

For some of you, this is the story of your last year. You think about the last year of your life, and you just feel like your suffering has been shaping you. Maybe it's loss or illness or injury. For some of you, it's difficulty getting pregnant or staying pregnant. For some of you, it's a complex family situation. Things have just been exploding in your family.

For others, you feel like you're still in the season of life that you don't want to be in. So, you think about the last year, and you feel like your suffering has been shaping you. For others of you, you think about suffering that you experienced years ago. For some of you, it's even things you experienced decades ago, and you're still trying to figure out how those things have shaped you.

A good friend of mine who I grew up with is in his mid-30s now. He has been out of his parents' house for about 15 years, he's a believer, and he has a family, but to this day, he will send me text messages and ask me questions like, "Do you think the reason I have trouble with confidence is because my dad used to make fun of me at football practice?" He'll say, "Do you think I'm insecure and lack confidence because my dad used to publicly berate me for not being as aggressive as the other boys?" This is real stuff.

You see, some of you have a story similar to that, and you need to know that where the ideal is lacking for you, yes, grace will abound. At the same time, we have to be aware of how our sufferings have shaped us. Paul says in verse 3, "We rejoice in our sufferings." Now, you read that and, if you're honest, you're like, "Well, that doesn't make much sense. Why in the world am I going to be rejoicing in my suffering?"

Here's the Christian understanding of suffering. It's very simple. *Your suffering is doing something*. Your suffering, if you are a believer, is doing something. It is building

endurance. It is profitable. So, a word for some of you might be that the suffering you're going through right now... Yes, it is painful, but it is not pointless. The pain you're feeling right now is somehow a part of God's plan for you, and the Lord might be using the pain you're experiencing right now to prepare you or position you. That's what he's doing.

Here's what's interesting about suffering. You can endure a lot more suffering than you think you can if you believe there is a purpose behind all of it. I just finished a book called *Endurance*. It's a wild story about these 28 guys who, in 1914, basically got stuck in Antarctica for over 500 days. To make a long story short, these guys were in brutal conditions. I mean, they were starving. They were freezing. They were getting frostbite. It was just terrible.

Now, the reason they were able to endure so much suffering was, first, because they were in community, but secondly, it was because they knew their suffering was doing something. They knew their suffering, over time, was getting them closer and closer to being rescued. In the same way, your suffering has a purpose. You might not always be aware of the purpose, but you can trust that if God is infinite in love and infinite in power, he's also going to be infinite in wisdom. God is in control, and he can be trusted.

Now, let's reread verses 3-4. It says, ***"Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character..."*** Here's how this happens. As you endure, as you remain under ongoing, repeated pressure without quitting, you end up becoming a certain type of person. You end up becoming a person of character.

I want to talk to parents for a minute, because all of us in here who are parents or grandparents would love, I'm sure, for all of our kids to be kids of character. Right? I mean, none of us are like, "You know what I would like? I would like for my child to be fragile and have no integrity." No. We all want our children to be men and women of character.

The tension parents have to figure out how to live in all the time is the tension between protecting and preparing. Now, the younger the child is the more heavily things are going to need to lean toward protecting. Then, as the child gets older, things are going to have to start to lean more toward preparing, preparing for the future, preparing to not live in your house anymore. So, what parents have to figure out how to do, if they want to build character in their child, is to give their child the gift of struggle.

Between 2010 and 2015 (some of you will remember this), there was a lot of research that came out. There was a lot of coverage on ESPN about chronic traumatic encephalopathy, CTE. It's what football players got in the NFL when they had a lot of

concussions and all that kind of stuff. Well, it was during that time that this question became very popular: "Will you let your son play football?"

Now, I'm not here to tell everybody what they need to do with their kids in sports. That's for you to decide. But I will tell you what my answer is. If you were to come up to me and ask, "Spencer, will you let your son Shepherd play football?" my answer is "If he wants to, I'm pretty sure we would." Why? Well, I played football for Burns High School in western North Carolina, which is in the foothills of the mountains.

To this day, I can remember 300-yard sprints in July heat, our coaches just yelling at us, our coaches making all kinds of demands of us. It was a lot of things. It had pros and cons, but it was a struggle. Well, I can remember I was the backup quarterback for our football team when we went into the first round of the playoffs against Northwest Cabarrus.

In the fourth quarter, guess what happens? Our star quarterback gets hurt. So, what do I think as someone who just turned 15 years old? I think, "Oh no!" It certainly wasn't confidence. So, I go in, and in the first play, I snap the ball and drop back, and our best player, Dante Hopper, is just running straight toward the end zone. He's going deep.

As he's running, he throws up his arm, which basically means, "Throw me the ball." So, I'm just there. I'm like, "This is my moment right here. Here it is." So, I just let it fly, just throw it deep. Right when I throw it, I get hit. I'm lying on the ground, so I can't see what's happening. Then, all of a sudden, I hear the crowd go wild...for the other team. It's okay. You can laugh. I'm over it.

Now, what did 15-year-old me have to learn in that moment? Well, I had to learn a lot of things. I had to learn how to deal with disappointment. I had to learn how to deal with being discouraged. I had to learn how to deal with being misunderstood. I had to learn how to figure out how to fail publicly, which comes in pretty handy in life since life is full of both private failures and public failures.

I had to learn, as a 15-year-old, to try to figure out how to do my best to take responsibility for as much as I can. It was a struggle, and that struggle is what produced character in me. In the same way, parents have to figure out how to give their kids the gift of struggle.

In our culture today, you'll hear a lot of talk about puberty blockers and how terrible puberty blockers are because they delay the physical development of a child. Yes, they are so terrible, wicked, horrible...all the things. Here's my concern. I believe that, unfortunately, many parents, even many well-meaning godly parents, are functioning as character blockers for their kids.

Not letting their kids take any risks. Helicopter parenting and snowplow parenting. Not wanting to go on a play date during cold season and flu season because you're concerned your toddler is going to get the sniffles, and if they get the sniffles, then they're not going to sleep as well, and if they don't sleep as well, then *you're* not going to sleep as well, so it makes your life difficult. And on and on it goes. It's fear-based parenting.

You see, what happens is that parents think they're protecting their kids when in reality they're actually making their kids weak and fragile. Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist, and he has done a lot of work on this topic. Basically, his whole thing is he says you need to prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child.

You can summarize much of Jonathan Haidt's work by saying this: if you want to help your kids build character, you need to figure out how to give them opportunities for moderate risk. Why? Because if you don't give your kids any chances for risk or minimal risk, then they're going to be bored. They're not going to have any opportunities for real-life stressors that cause them to develop, to grow, and to learn.

What's interesting is there's actually some data to suggest there is a connection between a lack of risky play as a child and having depression and anxiety as an adult. So, no risk is not good. On the other side of things, you obviously don't want to let your child have severe risk, because then you're just irresponsible. You're neglecting your child. It's probably not a good idea to let 10-year-old Johnny run the chainsaw.

So, we have to figure out how to give moderate risk. There's a quote from Peter Gray. He's a leading researcher in child development. He says, "All such activities are fun to the degree that they are moderately frightening. If too little fear is induced, the activity is boring; if too much is induced, it becomes no longer play but terror. Nobody but the child himself or herself knows the right dose..."

Now, there is a lot of grace. I know this is very challenging to figure out. Parents are doing their best, but the principle is you cannot make your kids safe, but you can try to make your kids strong. So, I just want to give you two very quick things to give your child if you want to help them grow character.

The first is *maximal responsibility*. If you want to help your child grow in character, they need maximum responsibility. It is helpful to assume that your child, as they are growing up, is more capable of taking on responsibility *this* month than they were *last* month. So, a helpful question to ask is "What are some things I might be able to transfer to my child for them to do to give them more responsibility?" This is a principle for us too. The way any of us grow in our character is by carrying a burden.

The second thing to give your child is *age-appropriate autonomy*. This is an interesting one. I was with a pastor a couple of years ago, and he was talking about how he parents his high school children. He said what he has been doing is giving his kids age-appropriate autonomy.

What that means is he is giving his 15-year-old the amount of autonomy a normal 15-year-old should be able to handle regardless of whether or not they're ready for it. I thought that was interesting. His whole logic was you want to give them what they should be able to handle regardless of whether or not they're ready, because if they struggle or if they mess it up while they're in your house, then you can correct them. You can help them.

That is way better than just withholding all of their autonomy from them until they get to be 18 years old and then *Boom!* They get all the autonomy at once and things get very messy. Age-appropriate autonomy. Two resources on this, if you're interested. The one is called *Risk is Right*. This is a book by John Piper. This is about risk in general. The other book is *The Coddling of the American Mind* by Jonathan Haidt.

Endurance produces character. Let's keep going. We're going to reread verses 4-5. ***"...and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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."***

So, we see here that character produces hope. You might read that and think, "The hope of what?" Well, it's the hope that God is with you and is working all things together for your good, which we're going to see later in Romans, chapter 8. You see, every other hope you have in life will disappoint you.

We discussed last week that optimism and hope are not the same thing. *Optimism* says, "I'm assuming that things are going to be better tomorrow." *Hope* is what I would describe as evidence-based. Biblical hope is evidence-based hope.

Now, in the medical community, we love to talk about evidence-based medicine. I know that's not for everybody, and that's fine, but a Christian understanding of hope is that it is evidence-based. Biblical hope says, "I have seen how the Lord has helped me to endure things in the past, and because of that, I'm confident that he's going to be with me in the future."

Now I want to let us look more at the reason behind our *hope for the future*, which is the fourth benefit of following Jesus. We're going to read verses 6-11, and I want you to notice as we read the different words Paul uses to describe our spiritual state before God intervened. So, let's read this together. Verse 6:

"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."

Theologians highlight this progression for us to highlight the incredible, illogical nature of the love of God. You see, the love of God is unlike any other love because of its timing and its target. Think about it. Paul tells us that Christ died for us while we were still weak, ungodly, sinners, enemies.

What that means is this is not like a soldier dying to protect his fellow soldier from being hurt. This would be like a soldier who has done nothing wrong voluntarily giving up his life in the place of a terrorist who has been convicted of war crimes. It's completely illogical. It's illogical in its timing and in its target.

When I think about the illogical nature of God's love, the thing that comes to my mind is foster care and adoption. Some friends of mine, about 10 years ago, adopted three kids who were 12, 10, and 8 at the time of the adoption. I can remember, when they moved forward with the adoption, I thought it was awesome. I admired them. I thought, "This is a picture of the gospel."

But if I'm being totally honest, when this happened, I thought to myself, "This seems extremely complex. It feels like what they are signing up for is almost unnecessarily difficult," because what they were signing up for in adopting 12, 10, and 8 was the exact opposite of self-preservation.

But the more I've thought about it, the more I've actually come to believe there is nothing that more closely mirrors the illogical nature of the timing and the target of God's love than parents who foster or adopt. It's voluntarily welcoming into your family someone at great cost to yourself, which is exactly what Jesus has done for us.

Paul says in verse 8, "***...God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***" Here's the truth about love: the proof of love is always found in what it is willing to give. If you want to know how much you love something, just ask what you are willing to give up for it, because the proof of love is found in what it is willing to give.

The reason the cross shows us God's love for us is because Jesus gave his life in order to reconcile us to himself, which is what we see in the last verse here, verse 11. It says, **"More than that, we also rejoice..."** That's the third time that word is used, by the way. **"...in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."** So, what Paul says here is "We rejoice, we worship, because the benefits of following Jesus have been given to us freely as a gift."

You might read that and think, "Okay. Well, these benefits are great, but what's the point of these benefits? What are we supposed to do with them?" Paul actually gives us the answer to that. It's elsewhere. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, Paul says, **"All this..."** What is *all this*? It's the gospel and its benefits. **"...is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself..."** Here's why. **"...and gave us the ministry of reconciliation..."**

You see, the reason we are given the benefits of following Jesus is so that we ourselves can become ministers of reconciliation and do whatever we can to see other people get those same benefits. So much of the Christian life is understanding that so many people you love, so many people you spend time with, and so many people you work with do not have peace with God because they do not have access to God in the same way you do. But here's what they *do* have: access to *you*.

If you are a follower of Jesus, then they have access to the best news in the world, which is the gospel of Jesus, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. I wonder what would happen if our churches became full of people who said, "You know what? I'm just going to do everything I can to give my life to the ministry of reconciliation."

For each of you, it's going to be different. For some of you, to become a minister of reconciliation might just mean you are more public about your faith in the workplace. You're more public about your faith with your family. For others of you, the Lord has given you a passion for the nations, a passion for those all over the world who have no access to God. So, your next step, as a minister of reconciliation, might be to go on a short-term trip. It might be to enter into a season of praying about going long-term or mid-term.

For some of you, when you hear the words *foster care* and *adoption*, something happens. You feel something. As soon as you hear that, you start to think about your life, and you think about your capacity, and you think about your resources, and you start asking, "Do I have something more to give? Do we have more space in our family that we could consider welcoming someone in?"

You see, God will bless those who give their lives to the ministry of reconciliation, but here's the thing: he'll often do it through suffering. I've been thinking recently about why

we can be so hesitant to give our lives to the ministry of reconciliation, to give our lives to the path that God blesses...suffering, endurance, character, hope. The more I thought about it, the more I think it really could be described in one word: *comfort*.

Think about it. What is the exact opposite of suffering? I think it's comfort. Right? Comfort, just to be clear, is not necessarily a bad thing. We're enjoying this 71-degree room, and our cars have air conditioning, and we like for our clothes to be comfortable. That's fine. But here's the problem. If you're not careful, comfort will become a cage. If you're not careful, your desire for comfort will begin to dictate everything about your life, and your ability to be a minister of reconciliation is going to plummet.

Think about it. Why is it that we're so hesitant to multiply our Community Groups to make new groups for new people? It's because we love our comfortable group, don't we? Why are we sometimes so hesitant to give generously to the kingdom of God? It's because we find comfort in our bank account. We find comfort in living a certain lifestyle. Why are we so hesitant sometimes to take some risks, to let our kids take risks? It's because it will often cost us our comfort.

Many of you know the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. One of my favorite scenes from that movie is when Morgan Freeman, or Red, is sitting around with a bunch of guys and talking with them about what it's like to be in prison for a long time. He says to the guys, "You know, these walls are funny."

He says, "At first you hate them, but then you get used to them, and if enough time passes, it gets to where you depend on them." The same is true for our comfort. Comfort becomes a cage when, over time, you are making decisions that are rooted in self-preservation instead of self-giving love.

One of our church partners... He and his family are missionaries in South Asia, and he has given his life to the ministry of reconciliation overseas. If we were to show you a picture, if you've been around for a while, you would recognize this guy, because we've been partners for a long time.

Well, I got permission to share this story from him. Within the last year, he was imprisoned for over one month for sharing the gospel. I was talking with him on the phone just over a week ago, and he was telling me about the conditions of the prison he was in. He said it was unbelievably overcrowded. It was disgusting.

He said that when he would go to sleep at night, he would lie down on his side on the concrete floor. Not a bed. He would lie down on his side, and he would be so close to another man that his chest would be just a few inches away from another man's back. He

told me, "You know, the more my wife and I think about this, the more we feel like this suffering was chosen for us."

It was almost like he was saying that he was rejoicing in his suffering because his suffering was doing something. His suffering was shaping him. Then he told me this. He said, "You know, I relate much differently now to comfort." He said, "For me now, what it means to find comfort is to just do whatever I can to serve the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart." May that be true of us. Let's bow our heads together.

With your heads bowed, I just want to give you a moment to reflect. I know some of you in this room are in a season of suffering. It's illness. It's injury. It's loss. It's complicated family dynamics. Or for some of you, you are very close to someone who is suffering, and you are discouraged.

In just a moment, I'm going to invite you to come forward, as you feel led, to pray for endurance, to pray for hope, to pray for the peace of God as you suffer. Others of you feel like comfort has been dictating too much of your life for too long, and even now, you feel like you might be called to some kind of illogical, self-giving love.

So, in a moment, I'm going to invite you forward to come and continue that conversation with God. Others of you feel like your main problem is that you don't have peace with God; therefore, you do not have the peace of God, so you might need to receive Jesus by faith today.

Father, I thank you that you love us, that while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us. Lord, I pray that your love would compel us. Would your love empower us? Would your love lead us to take a lot of gospel risks for the sake of your name going forward? We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.