



Enlisted-Part 4

Elizabeth: God's Unexpected Hero

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Well, just as you pull up to the San Diego airport, you pass the Marine Corps Recruit Depot. Have you noticed that big facility there? Just **before** you get to the airport on the right. Well, some of you have noticed it because you got processed through it, right? This is a place where thousands of Marines get their start. And as any one of them that's been to **MCRD** will tell you, there's a lot of pain that goes on behind the gates of that place.

But here's the thing: it's not pain for pain's sake. This is pain with a purpose—pain, to use a biblical phrase, that is designed to work together for good. It's a pain that is tenaciously endured and even capitalized on by recruits because they understand its purpose. That principle is largely overlooked these days as it relates to Christianity—something rarely mentioned, it seems, when it comes to biblical Christianity—because we would prefer to imagine the Christian life like pulling up to the San Diego airport with our bags packed to take off on some spiritual vacation destination where God is going to soothe all of our hurts and fix all of our problems and make everything better.

We rarely seem to see ourselves as being enlisted into the service of Christ and pulling through the gates of **MCRD** to get ready to serve him well. I mean, that's not usually how we like to view the Christian life. And unfortunately then, with that confusion, we find that when Christians encounter pain, they throw up their hands and they get all frustrated, and they start—actually some of them—losing heart on the whole thing, thinking, "I didn't sign up for this." They see it as confusion. They see it as a contradiction. They don't see it as God's strategic plan in their lives. And that creates all kinds of problems in people's lives.

Well, if you keep your nose in the Book, you won't have that problem. Because the Bible is laced with verses that try to remind us—this perspective-building perspective is there—that the exhortations and verses of the Bible are trying to get us to remember that we are, as Paul said to Timothy, to suffer hardship with him as a good soldier; or even to think through the words to the **Ephesian** Christians to put on the full armor of God so that you'll be able to withstand all this that's coming against us, the onslaught of the enemy; or even just the simple principle when Paul said to the Roman Christians in chapter five, "Hey, you ought to rejoice in all your sufferings, knowing that your sufferings produce endurance," and see, that's what God wants—strong Christians. Why? Because he's going to use them for something in this world that's important, and we need strength, we need endurance, we need to build these Christians up, and pain is part of that purposeful process.

Now, of course, for us as Christians, the pain is not some barking sergeant and tactical drills and hiking up mountains with backpacks on our backs or push-ups and pull-ups. That's not the kind of

pain we're talking about. But it's pain nevertheless. It's pain just the same. It can be the pain of loss, pain of loneliness, pain of deprivation, prayers that aren't answered, pain of relational conflicts—conflicts in marriage, issues with our children, issues at work, economic problems, houses that get foreclosed upon, diagnoses from the doctor's office where we now are burdened with the pain of seeing our bodies curtailed and limited, the pain of betrayal, the pain of people misunderstanding our motives, sometimes even the private and very personal pain of infertility, of all things—which happened to be the kind of protracted and prolonged pain in the life of the fourth character we want to study here in Luke chapter one. Her name is Elizabeth, and that was her pain that was strategically prescribed by God to prepare her to do great things in the kingdom of heaven.

And if you'd look at it with me in Luke chapter one, you'll remember now this is the fourth character that we're looking at. We've already met her in passing as we looked at her husband **Zechariah**, who was visited by the angel Gabriel to say that you're going to have the forerunner of the Messiah—John the Baptist—coming in the power and spirit of Elijah. You're going to raise that kid. Now I know you're old and your wife is old and you're past childbearing age. But you're going to have this kid anyway. Oh, he didn't believe God's messenger, and so he was struck with the inability to speak for nine months. And we met his wife there in the first few verses of the narrative in verses five through seven.

But I want to look at her exclusively today and focus on her life and maybe more specifically her pain—the pain that God had purposely prescribed for her life—and see if it's something we can learn from this morning. Look at the text with me, with verse number five. We'll look at four different sections where Elizabeth appears throughout this first chapter. And we'll start with the setting in verse number five when it says, "In the days of **Herod**—that's Herod the Great—we get four generations of the Herod family in the New Testament history, but here's the first one—Herod the Great, king of Judea, the whole region actually of the ancient land of Israel and beyond—there was a priest named **Zechariah**." We've already talked about him. He was of one of the 24 divisions of the priesthood. He was from the division of **Abijah**. And a wife from the daughters of Aaron—that wasn't required for the priests, but he chose one who was of a Levitical **descendant**—and her name was Elizabeth, named—actually, this is the **Hellenized** form of the word—after the original wife of Aaron way back in the Old Testament. And so here was a gal from a priestly family marrying a priest.

And the text says in verse number six, "They were both righteous before God." Now the text is careful to tell us it wasn't **Zechariah**—right? This was both of them living a righteous life. This is not forensic righteousness. This is not God declaring them righteous—I'm sure that was all true as well as they trusted in God for the provision for their sin. We're talking here about comparative or practical righteousness. These people were living righteous lives. Look at the rest of verse six: they were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. Now that doesn't mean they were perfect, as we said when we studied **Zechariah**, but that means they were living consistent lives. They were, as we say in the New Testament, above reproach. They were doing the things that God had asked them to do. Yeah, they had all the foibles and frailties of every human



being on the planet, but they were people that took the Word of God seriously and the commands of God, and they diligently resolved to keep them and did it with a lot of success.

“But,” verse seven, “they had no child.” And we’ve already said, and even last week when we looked at Mary’s life, we understand how important kids are—that they got married really early in their teenage years, they started having children right away, had as many as possible. It was so important, not only for your status as a Jewish woman in the first century, but also for your security, your future. I mean, this was important in any agrarian society—to have as many kids as possible. And here was a godly couple; they had no child. And specifically it says because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years. So this is an ongoing decades-long pain in the life of Elizabeth.

I just want you to see the contrast between verse six and seven, the juxtaposition between an explanation that they were godly people and the explanation that they were suffering with childlessness. With 10% of the women in America today struggling to have kids—actually, it’s 10.9; 11% struggle to have a kid, 6% are clinically infertile—I know there’s gals in this room who can feel a little bit of that pain even today, even though we don’t have the cultural pressure they had in the first century, even the economic necessity they had in the first century. You can sit here and feel the pain of a gal who’s gone to a lot of baby showers and never had her own child, who watches all her contemporaries go through the process of carting around and lovingly cradling their own child, and never being able to conceive—month after month reminding yourself through your entire marriage that you are barren, childless. That juxtaposition—that combination of godliness and pain—is something we just need to get used to.

Matter of fact, I’d like to state it that way. If you found your worship packet there, that worksheet that follows along through the movements of this sermon, I’d love for you to write this down. Number one on your outline: we need to realize God’s heroes suffer. It’s just a reality. I’ve already—even by the opening of the sermon—started to hint at some of the reasons he might, but let’s just stay with that basic principle: God’s heroes—and by that I mean here’s a gal that’s going to serve a very important role in the kingdom of Christ. You are going to raise John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah—someone predicted at least twice in the Minor Prophets that this kid is going to be instrumental in the whole work of Christ. And you’re very important to God. Not only that, your life is pleasing to God—you live a consistently godly life—and you’re suffering, chronically suffering. Just that needs to be a part of our understanding so we don’t simplistically boil down the principles of Scripture to think if you’re living a life pleasing to God you won’t be suffering—just not a reality. Here’s another example—and there’s a plethora of examples in the Bible—of this reality: godly people in pain.

Now, if you are one of the 11 to 6% of the gals that have struggled with childlessness and you’re biblically literate, there’s probably a proverb that you’ve read with a poignancy that kind of jumped off the page at you. As a matter of fact, I have books on my shelf relating to infertility because my



wife and I dealt with that. First ten years of our marriage we had no kids. And one of the books on my shelf is even named after this proverb. It's Proverbs chapter 13 verse 12—don't take time to turn there, we don't have time to get to that text—but let me quote it for you: Proverbs chapter 13 verse 12 simply reads this—"Hope deferred makes the heart sick."

Think of that—hope deferred. I want this kid, I want to have this, and every month the chronic reminder: not this month, not now. Not this month, not now. "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." And most of us think, as we pull up to the San Diego airport and pack up to have this journey with Christ—supposed to make my heart joyful, supposed to be happy. I'm supposed to be singing the praises of God, and my prayers—they're peppered with thanksgiving—and this is a happy thing we're signing up for, right? Here's the reality of a gal who lived her entire adult life with a sickness in her heart. Because like any wannabe mother, hope—when it's deferred—just makes your heart sick.

Now, what's the deal? Well, we're not one-dimensional creatures. Clearly, you can rejoice, you can be thankful, you can have moments of levity and laughter and all the rest and still have that nagging heart-sickness, can't you? I mean, I guess a dramatic illustration would be taking a day off from work because you got the flu, and you sit there and you turn on the TV—you might have a moment of laughter and all that, you find great, but there's an underlying problem: you don't feel well. Now, you can have moments of laughter, rejoicing, thanksgiving, prayer—even celebratory moments—and still have that kind of nagging, chronic, prolonged pain in your heart. I mean, you can, I hope, all attest to that at some level. This was the reality for someone that was not only dearly loved by God but was going to be used instrumentally by God to do something significant in the whole economy of Christ. And God had chosen to prescribe for her a sickness of heart, if you will—a pain in her life. And he did it for a strategic reason.

The challenge though—before we look at some of that—let's just think through the challenge for us when we do suffer and we have tried, much like Elizabeth, to live a blameless life doing what God asked. The challenge for us is to maintain the right perspective about God in those times. Let me take you to a passage we studied this summer if you've been around campus for a while. I want you to turn back to Psalm 73. Keep your finger here in Luke chapter one and turn with me to Psalm 73. As we look at this psalm of Asaph, I'll just cherry-pick a few verses out of here to give us the whole feel of the chapter. But if you were with us when we studied that this summer, you know this is a real heart-wrenching text that all of us can identify with if you've ever given yourself to do something with integrity—living a life that is above reproach, living a life that is blameless, living a life that keeps the laws of God—and then you've watched other people who don't advance beyond you.

Think about how often this is the case, and how often it must have felt this way for Elizabeth when some person that lived a life that was by no means exemplary—some gal down the street who didn't keep the law of God, some gal down the street who really didn't revere God or live for his

rules—and here she was, I mean “Fertile Myrtle” popping out kids every ten months, right? How did that affect Elizabeth as she sat there serving God, living for God? I mean, she’s a pastor’s wife, right, really in essence, in the first century, and keeping her integrity and yet suffering while other people weren’t.

Psalm 73 verse 1 starts with the statement of truth that he gets back to in the end, and it’s something he’s almost convincing himself of in the first verse in Psalm 73 when he says, “Truly, God is good to Israel, specifically to those who are pure in heart.” God is good to the pure in heart. Right. Now here’s a gal—Elizabeth—she’s pure in heart, she’s got the right heart. Doesn’t look like God’s being good to her. Oh, other areas of her life are good, I get that. But this is a nagging pain. Asaph felt that because in his life he experienced the paradox of not having the blessings of God or the answers to his prayer when he was doing the right stuff. He says, “But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped.” Why? Verse 3: “I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” That’s the problem.

I want to talk about comparative righteousness. I can look over there and see someone who doesn’t live like I do. And I know I’m doing it for the glory of God, but I look at my life and I see I’m trying to do what God has asked me to do, and that person is shining on everything that’s biblical, doesn’t care about it, is not living any kind of life that anyone would hold up as a good life—and look at them: they don’t have their house foreclosed on. Look at that guy down the hallway: he gets to keep his job; I got laid off. Look at that guy over there—couldn’t care less about Christianity—and he stays healthy when my doctor diagnoses me with cancer. What’s going on? That’s a time when Asaph admits his feet had almost stumbled; his steps had nearly slipped.

Matter of fact, he got to this place in verse 13 when he says, “Maybe all in vain I’ve kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.” Maybe this was all for nothing. “For all day long,” he says, “I have been stricken” (verse 14) “and rebuked every morning.” I’m carrying around pain in my heart. “Maybe this is useless to serve God.” Well, that’s certainly going to be a feeling that runs through his mind. But look at verse 15: “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus’”—I’ll speak that way, that’s going to be my thought—now that’s something you may think, but you know, now I’m thinking, if I would say it and say that’s what I believe and this is all for nothing and I don’t know anyone would serve God—if I get to that place, he says, “I would have betrayed the generation of your children.” That would have been a turning my back on the whole thing. That would have been saying, “Hey, everybody, this whole thing about living for God—it’s a waste.”

But verse 16: “When I thought how to understand this”—contrast, this conflict, this thing that doesn’t add up, this non sequitur—“it seemed to me a wearisome task.” He couldn’t figure it out, didn’t get it, “until” (verse 17) “I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” I recognized something about the temporal nature of my pain. And I recognize this about the people that seem to be advancing even though they don’t live for the God I live for—that there’s a consequence for turning your back on God that may not be readily seen in their lives; that maybe



right now the picture of how this all plays out, it may not be fair to judge it on the last ten years or the last twenty years. Maybe the reality of how the dust settles when this is all finished in life—maybe I need to wait to see, in the big perspective, what God has promised for those that love him and are called according to his purpose.

Down to verse 23: he finally gets around to thinking about the things that he has, even though he doesn't have the answer to his prayers. He says, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel," even though you don't, you know, dispense on me all the answers to my prayers, "and afterward"—you want to think about big picture—"you will receive me into glory."

A text I need you to write down—we don't have time to look at this one either—but Psalm 34, just the guts of that right in the center, verses like 14 through 17 deal with the issue of a God who looks to the prayer of the righteous. Now again, this is the frustrating principle: if God looks to the prayer of the righteous, then what's the deal? Well, it goes on to make it clear, you know, there's a lot of pain that comes and a lot of prolonging of our pain. He says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous." Right—many are the afflictions of the righteous. But then there's a statement—which again, it almost seems to ring hollow for a lot of you—"but the Lord delivers him out of them all."

Now, I can understand a gal who doesn't have a kid for a lot of years and maybe she's going to have the kid. But my pain seems permanent. I mean, especially we can talk about death. I lost my spouse this year. I buried my kid last year. My best friend killed in a car accident. What—I mean, how can you deliver me out of that affliction? I can understand that this happens, as the text says it does. I'm crying out to God. Well, that text immediately puts it this way: number one, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted." So one thing I recognize—as Asaph said—there's something about my holding God's hand in the midst of trial. Something happens here. And if you're a real Christian in the midst of suffering, I hope you could testify—if we opened up the microphone—that there's something about your intimacy with God that grows during all of this. But are you saying it's not true that he delivers you out of them all? But what did Asaph say? Your perspective may be too small.

Now, put your finger in that thought for a second. Let's go back to Luke chapter one. Because I want to show you that when Elizabeth thought all hope had been lost—she was advanced in years and they were thinking, you know, this is never going to happen—of course, the intervention of God and here comes this baby. Look at verses 24 and 25 when it says, after these days (this is Luke 1:24), Elizabeth conceived. Now this is an interesting thing—it's a bit of a head-scratcher; you can put a question mark in the margin of your Bible—for five months she kept herself hidden. Commentators will be all over the place on why that happened, and they can only, you know, conjecture and suppose what might have been the case. But whatever the case, she didn't go about her normal duties. She didn't hang out with the gals as she normally does. She doesn't go to the marketplace. She somehow figures out how to live life in seclusion for five months. And during that

time, she's saying this (verse 25): "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked upon me, to take away my reproach among people."

She savors the answer to the prayer. Those must have been five really intense months of thanksgiving and worship. How profound would it be, after years of not conceiving, bearing the reproach of everybody in your village in the hill country of Judea, and then being sequestered in your own home, cloistered there saying, "God, you did it, you did it, you did it. I prayed incessantly about this, and you've provided this for me." I mean, talk about the relief. She's, "You've taken away my reproach." Maybe just so that when she did go back out in public, she was sure that she was showing, right? "Let's make sure everybody sees—God's provided." Whatever the case, she spends time recognizing that her season of pain—at least in this department of her life—had ended.

That's exactly what I quoted for you there in Psalm 34. God has promised that our pain will come to an end. He does promise that though the righteous are afflicted in lots of ways, he delivers them out of them all. So let's at least write that down, and let's work backwards and think through that a little bit. Number two on your outline: it ended for Elizabeth, and I want to say as broadly as I can—it will end for all those. You need to be confident that the pain will end. Whatever it is that God is not supplying, whatever it is that God is not answering, whatever it is he's not reversing, whatever the pain in your life right now—I can say it, based on what the Bible teaches—it's going to end. And for Elizabeth, she rejoiced in the fact that it ended. And there was something about the truth of knowing it's going to end that can get you through it.

Back to **MCRD** and the sweating recruit—there's a place in which there's something that breeds a kind of inner strength and fortitude when, in the midst of the pain, I can look to the end of the pain and just by faith know, "At some point, this is going to be done." Not only in the day of tactical exercise and training, but even in the fact that one day all those recruits end up on that big staging area in their graduation ceremony and they get done with **MCRD** and they move on. And for Christians, that's the reality we need to start to picture.

And I want to show you—and this is a bit subtle, so don't miss this—turn with me to Hebrews chapter 11, to another infertile gal that is referred back to in a New Testament text about an Old Testament circumstance where Sarah, Abraham's wife, is described as getting her wish fulfilled—her desire, her prayer request granted—but not really. There's a bit of a subtlety here in this text that I think is very important for us to catch. Because if you say, "Well, wait a minute, I understand that maybe the recruit is going to have the day of exhausting and excruciating pain end. What about the Marine who gets his arm blown off or his leg blown off? That seems pretty permanent. How does that affliction end?" Right? Well, in the macro sense, as we're going to see in Hebrews 11, I guess we can say that even if we get our prayer answered in this life, it's not going to be the kind of completion regarding any desire in our hearts that our hearts really desire. There will never be a fulfillment to what we are asking for.

When Elizabeth prays to cradle a baby in her arms, there's something about that desire that cannot be fulfilled in this life—that whether it is completed now, it will only be a foretaste of then; or whether it's not provided now and the reality is then. The final destination of every Christian is this, to quote Revelation 21: he'll wipe away every tear. There'll be no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. The first order of things—which every gift from God is ultimately a temporary stave of some kind of future frustration—is going to be done. The first order of things gone. Behold, he's made all things new.

C. S. Lewis said, “When I find in my heart desires for things that can never be satisfied in this life, my only logical and rational conclusion: I was made not for this world but for another.” Do you follow that? That's how the Scripture here in Hebrews 11 applies the answer to Sarah's prayer for a child as something that is really only partial—only a foretaste of what Sarah really wanted. And in that regard, I guess I can say when you pray for relief from your disease and you get it, it's really not what your heart desires. It's only a temporary hold on something that ultimately will fail. I mean, to have your marriage fixed or your business fixed, or you to be gainfully employed and not laid off, or for you not to lose your house to foreclosure—if God provides that, I just need to say the pain will end, but that's only a foretaste of when the pain really ends. Because that's not really what your heart desires. Because all of God's promises ultimately have to reach their culmination, and that won't happen in this life.

That may be too philosophical, so let me let the Scripture just preach to you here clearly. Verse 11 of chapter 11 of Hebrews: Sarah—as you remember her story, much like Elizabeth, past the age of having kids—“received power to conceive, even though she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.” God promised it was going to happen, with a much bigger period of time between promise and fulfillment than Elizabeth ever had. “Therefore from one man”—and this is no compliment—“and him as good as dead” (okay, I've got a few wrinkles here, Abraham says, but yeah, you're dead-old has-been, old man), “were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven, as many as the innumerable grains of sand on the seashore.”

Time out. Really? Wait a minute. Now I know that was the promise, and it started in Genesis 12 and it went to Genesis 15 and reiterated in Genesis 17 and on and on it went—that he kept saying, “You're gonna have descendants like the sand on the seashore.” But what did God do in fulfilling the promise for Abraham in this life? Gave him Isaac. Now that's one mouth to feed, right? That's one kid from my wife Sarah. That's really not that. I mean, really, I guess you could say we really started to see things crank up from the bleachers as he looked from heaven, perhaps, at what was happening with his descendants. But even yet Abraham awaits the fulfillment of that promise. He had a kid—that's what they prayed for. They had a child—that's what she wanted desperately. But it really wasn't the culmination of all that her heart desired.

Go back to verse 8 to apply it to the land. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.” You remember—he was leaving **Ur of the Chaldeans** at the bottom of the Tigris and Euphrates River—bottom of ancient Chaldea, pre-Babylonian period. He was gonna come up through the Euphrates, Mesopotamian region, come up and over and into the land of Canaan. And he was going to go in and—here, the Promised Land. That was the promise. And he went out not knowing where he was going, but “by faith he went to live in the land of promise.” Oh, he got there. Great. Oh, problem was, it was “living as in a foreign land.” Oh, no palatial palaces there; here, living in tents with your kid Isaac, and Jacob did the same thing—heirs with him of the same promise. And what was the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? “Oh, you’re going to have this land.” Well, then why do I have to live in a place where it seems like I’m a foreigner? Well, that’s the part of the promise you got—you got to go there; you got to live there. But that’s really not the fulfillment of what I promised, nor is that the fulfillment of what you wanted. “For he was”—to speak of Abraham (verse 10)—“looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

Don’t miss the double entendre there. You catch it. When he left Ur of the Chaldeans in the southern part of the Mesopotamian region, he went up and over into the Promised Land; he got to see it. And as he was going, he wanted that place—that city whose architect and designer and builder was God. But that could only be partially applied to what he would ever experience over there. And frankly, even as the rest of human history plays itself out here on fallen planet Earth, ultimately you’re not gonna get that until you move on to the next one.

Drop down to verse 13: after we talk about Sarah it says, “All these”—including, in the immediate context, you’ve got Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; specifically though we’re talking about Abraham and Sarah—“all these died in faith”—this is worth underlining—“not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” They had to look beyond the horizon of this life. “For people who speak thus” (if you happen to join them in that thinking that even if you want that job, you want good health—you want the things that hurt your heart to be fixed right now—that really it’s something that would never be fully realized here), “they make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.” If they had been thinking of the land from which they’d gone out, they would have had opportunity to return (verse 16). “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” Something beyond the horizon of this life. “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” And it isn’t here. It’s not on this planet. It’s not in this economy. It’s not the first order of things.

You need to be confident that the pain will end. And if you’re thinking like a lot of Christians, I’m not just saying you’re going to get what you want in this life—although Elizabeth would rejoice that she got what she wanted. But if you really stopped and talked to the godly Elizabeth about what her heart truly desired, it would really go beyond—when it relates to what she asked for—even raising John the Baptist. Because those are only temporary foretastes of what God has designed us to enjoy. And that’s what we’re constantly trying to do by the preaching of the Word—is not to get us thinking a little bit bigger, especially for those of you that see this not as the pain of the exercises



at **MCRD**, but coming home from a battle with an appendage blown off. Because to you, you say, “That’ll never be fixed. My kid died. I never get to see my kid grow up and get married,” or whatever it is. How do you fix that? All I’m saying is the promise for Christians is—even if there had been survival, even if that accident didn’t happen, even if that diagnosis were reversed—what you’re longing for can only be fulfilled in the next life. And in that regard, the pain will end. We gotta think bigger here.

Had another game night with the kids recently. We have those about every two or three years with our busy schedule, and so we’re slated to do another one a few years from now, particularly because when we had it this time, we had a night, happened to be all home, and we pulled out the games. And I realized it’s so much different than the last few times we did this years back because back then we only had two competitive personalities playing the games. Now we have five. Frankly, wasn’t very fun. We got into it. I mean, you know—pastor’s home—hopefully your imagination’s not running wild and no one was yelling or throwing anything. It was not out of control. But it was clear it wasn’t pleasant. We’re playing this board game and “Not your turn. Did you see that card?” I don’t remember all that. It just got to a place where I’m thinking, “Why did we pull this board game out? We’re not having any fun right now.” And at some point, you catch yourself—I mean, certainly, I’m supposed to be the mature one. I start to catch myself and say, “You know what? I can keep playing. I don’t need to get all uptight about this because, frankly, I know in 30 minutes we’re gonna fold the board game up, put it away, and plop down on a couch and eat ice cream. I know that’s coming.” And frankly, it couldn’t come soon enough for me halfway through the game.

You know, especially when you’re pulling cards. At one point, we were playing The Game of Life—and that game—dads should not play that game. There’s too much reality in games like that. Your mortgage goes up, you get this, you’re getting to buy insurance. “Do you want to pay for your education, go to college?” And you pull a card and end up being a starving artist and you put all this money into college. It was horrible. But yet I thought to myself, listen, we’re going to be sitting down together, relaxing, having dessert in a little bit. I don’t want to be embarrassed thinking back at the angst and frustration during the game because I know this is temporary.

See, the problem with us when it comes to our pain is we have a hard time getting it in perspective because sometimes we just think it’s everything. We’re so myopic about it, when in reality we need to recognize this is all short. What does Paul say about it? He says this—and he says this purposefully, and he’s got big, big pains in view when he says this—“Our light and momentary afflictions are not to be compared to the glory to be revealed to us.” Right. And then he says this (because we set our sights—is how the whole argument ends)—not on things that are seen, but on things that are unseen. Because the things that are seen are temporal—they’re only here for a while—but the things that are unseen are eternal.

See, the reality is when it comes to how things are falling apart in your life and you pray for them to be fixed—like you’re trying to pull the right card from the deck so that maybe you can advance and



not roll that thing and go back five spaces every time like I did—you want to move forward in the game. You have to recognize, even when you pull that bad card and roll that wrong die and it goes to the wrong place again, you’ve got to think, “This is not all there is to reality.” And I want to handle the defeats and difficulties and lose to my nine-year-old at a board game with dignity and honor, because I know it really doesn’t matter as much as it’s feeling like it matters right now.

There may be things—there may be spiritual appendages blown off of your life—that you say, “I’m gonna have to live the rest of my life with this pain.” You may. But here’s the thing: if you’re a Christian, you really have the right relationship with God that we’re always harping on—I mean, it is a much smaller thing than it appears to be in your life right now. All that from a gal that we’re learning from who got her prayer answered. But let me show you—even with her prayer answered—can you look down to verses 39 through 45 in Luke chapter one? She responds almost in a counterintuitive way when Mary shows up.

Now, we looked at this briefly last week. When Mary shows up, she travels 85–95 miles south to the hill country of Judea, probably in a caravan or with her extended family—whatever—she shows up and visits with her distant relative (we’re assuming some relative; we don’t know how she’s related to Elizabeth). But she comes to visit Elizabeth. Now I’m thinking if Elizabeth is all consumed with her own pain, and then when God relieves her pain, I’m assuming she’d be all consumed with her own answer to prayer—that God answered her prayer. This would be the topic of conversation the minute they meet. But it’s not. Now I know that there’s not the whole record of their discussion. They spent time together. There’s lots that was said. But this is what the Scripture chooses to show us about the conversation between Elizabeth and Mary, and it is very telling how this conversation goes.

Verse 39: “In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah. And she entered the house of **Zechariah** and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb”—little prenatal John the Baptist in there, right?—started kicking around, leaped in her womb—“and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” So whatever we’re gonna get now is divine commentary. This is God’s take on it. “And she exclaimed with a loud voice,” and obviously, whenever God’s working in people, this is Elizabeth’s heart as well: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

Now catch the paradox. I did paint this picture before last week. You’ve got the—I don’t know—60-something, I’m guessing, Elizabeth—pastor’s wife, seasoned, experienced woman in the village there in the hill country of Judea—talking now to the peasant girl traveling from **Nazareth**, some relative of hers who’s probably 15 years old, roughly, somewhere in that neighborhood, who comes into her house. And she says, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Now I’m thinking the first conversation I’m going to have if God has answered my lifelong prayer is, “Hey, did you know I’m pregnant?” Right? And the focus is now on Mary. Obviously, as the Spirit guides this conversation, she is blessing Mary. And she’s saying how blessed it is that



God has given you this child. “And why is this granted to me”—you want to talk about humility (verse 43)—“that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

Now I understand this: your kid’s more important than my kid. John the Baptist will play this out later in the book: “He’s got to increase; I gotta decrease.” What’s the point here? The mother of John the Baptist says to the mother of Christ, “I understand it’s your kid—what it’s all about here. My kid—just forerunner.” I’m not even yet talking about my pregnancy. “For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” Think that through—little prenatal, you know, politics going on here—John the Baptist flipping around inside of Elizabeth. Yeah, apparently, by the commentary of the Holy Spirit, super excited that the Lord Jesus Christ being carried around in the teenage womb of Mary has showed up in the same room. “And blessed is she”—by the way, now back to you, Mary—“who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” And as you remember last week, here’s, you know, in the corner, Mr. Zech—who didn’t believe—silent, going “Huh?”

She’s excited that Mary has faith—that she’s carrying around a baby more important than hers—with no mention in this recorded conversation—seven verses or whatever it is—about anything that’s going on in Elizabeth’s life. And frankly, Elizabeth has more airtime in this chapter than anybody else. And she recognizes, “Hey—stuff more important than my pain; stuff more important than God’s blessing in my life.”

Number three: let’s just jot it down this way. We need to get your pain and your joy in perspective. And that is so important for you to recognize that whether you’re on the pain side of this or on the relief side of this, your pain is not the center of the universe, and your answers to prayer—when God gives you relief from your pain—that’s not the center of the universe either. Now, I’m not minimizing the all-consuming nature of real grief and pain. I’m not at all trying to minimize your pain. But I am wanting to get it in perspective.

I talked to you last week or two weeks ago about my foray into competitive chess. That sounds almost important, right? This is my grammar school chess tournament when I was in sixth grade, or whatever it was. I thought of that when I was studying this text this week, thinking it’s kind of like a chessboard. When we are hurting, or when God answers our prayer, it’s like we feel like we’re the king. Right? We’re the center of it. And when anybody talks to us—man, it’s “What happened to me? Let me tell you what I’m struggling with.” The newsflash is: you’re not the king. Right? You’re probably not even a bishop or a rook in this scenario. I mean, most of us—really, let’s be honest—we’re pawns in this. Now, you’re important. You’re on the right team. You’re defending and protecting and advancing the King’s agenda—I get that. But when you’re there struggling with the other pawn—oh, you’re just a pawn, right? When you capture the other pawn—oh, that’s a great thing. Fantastic. You’re just a pawn.

There's a word in Luke chapter one used four times that reminds us of our status as a pawn. We saw it when Mary was told she's going to have the King of kings in her own body, giving birth to Christ. She called herself the *doulē*—a bondservant. The slave (to use the feminine form) in Greek—it's such a great, fabulous word—*doulē* of the Lord. "I'm just a slave girl—a bondservant, a servant-girl—of the Lord." That perspective we learned from Mary—the humility of Mary—is something we see by the behavior of Elizabeth in this text in that she's not all concerned about her pain or her joy. She recognizes it's about Christ. It's not about her. It's not about her kid. Are they important? Absolutely important. Does she recognize that? Does she think so as to have sound reason? Absolutely. But she does not think more of herself than she ought, nor does she think more of her pain. And it seems, at least in this text, she didn't think more of the answer to her prayer than she ought. She's got the right perspective.

Remember when Rachel—speaking of another infertile gal in the Bible—in Genesis 30 was struggling with her pain of not having a kid? Verse 1—it's almost comical if it weren't such an egregious attitude and such a profound pain. She says, as she, fueled a little bit by envy because of her sister, says to Jacob, "Give me children, or"—I'll cry?—"I'll die." You know your pain has kind of taken center stage in the universe when that's your response. That is the wrong example. I don't know anything about Elizabeth during her years of infertility—they don't give us a description of it—but I would think someone blameless, walking blamelessly in the commandments and statutes of the Lord—she probably was one who didn't carry around that kind of attitude. And when the answer to her prayer—well, I do get a window into that—she keeps that all in perspective.

Speaking of the word *doulos* or slave/servant, turn real quickly—before we leave this point—to Luke 17. Just real quickly. Your pain or your joys need to be put in the perspective that when it comes to the chessboard of Christianity, you're just a player; you're not the king. And that will help us, I think, not be so offended by what Jesus says in this text. Because if you come in thinking you are the king and you are the center of God's whole plan in the universe, well then you'll struggle with these two episodes in Christ's teaching.

Luke 17:7—scenario number one: "Will any one of you who has a *doulos*, a servant/slave/bondservant, plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he's come in from the field, 'Oh, look at your hands and your calluses. Do you need any antibiotic cream? Man, can I get you some band-aids? Oh, put your feet up here on the table; you must be exhausted.'" Does anybody say that? "Do you say, 'Come in at once and recline at table'?" Of course not. Verse 8: "Will he not rather say"—if he's the master and this is his slave—"Prepare supper for me, dress properly, serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink"? May seem harsh, but I mean, if we're really talking about a master and a servant, that's how it works. "Does he thank the servant?"—"Thank you so much; you would think of me, be so kind to do that"—no. "Does he thank him because he did what he was commanded?" Now he applies this to disciples (verse 10): "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy *douloi*—unworthy slaves; we have only done what was our duty.'"



See, the pains in our lives—we just need to get them in perspective, because if we’re pawns in this and not the king, then what we need to recognize is that even our pains—or the answers to our prayers that never come, the protraction of our frustrations—really, as a slave of God, if that’s what’s prescribed, if that’s what God has called me to do—hey, you know, Private First Class—this is part of your job. Just bear it. Bear it with dignity and honor, so that you don’t look back at it one day and see yourself as an embarrassed example of someone who whined and complained.

Next example: the blessings and joys of life—when God gives us good things. Jesus tells the story (verse 11): “On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’ When he saw them he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went they were cleansed.” And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” It’s a big deal.

Even our joys need to be seen in relation to the fact that we are all about the King. What does the Bible say? No matter how mundane it is—whether you eat or drink—do all to the glory of God. When it comes to our lives, we need to recognize that our responsibility, as just a player on the big scene of what God is doing in the world, is that our pains are a lot smaller than we tend to think they are, and our relief is a lot smaller than we tend to think it is. And we need to get all that in perspective and recognize we’re here to serve the King—not only with our lives, even if they hurt, but in the answer and relief that he brings.

And let me take that a step further by showing you Elizabeth’s response to the birth—the actual birth—of John the Baptist back in verse 57 of Luke chapter one. Let’s wrap it up with this thought here—verses 57 through 66—as we see Elizabeth finally giving birth. After nine months she has this kid (verse 57): “Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him **Zechariah** after his father.”

“And they would have called him **Zechariah** after his father.” They would have called him **Zechariah**—think that through. For all the years they wanted this kid, how many times do you think they discussed, “If we had a kid...”—especially the longer this went on, the deprivation of not having a kid—I mean “Zach Jr.” was in their minds. That was the only option. And all the family—“Absolutely, this is your kid, completing your life, and you get the desire of your heart. And Zach Jr.—you and Zech are going to be inseparable. This is it. He’s here. Let’s call him Zach.” Absolutely. “And his mother answered, ‘No; he shall be called John.’” Why? Because that’s what Gabriel said. This guy is bigger than you. This is bigger than your plan to have a kid. This is not about you being able just to walk around saying you have a child. This kid’s going to be great in the



eyes of God. He's got a job to do—to turn many of the people in Israel back to God, to set the stage and prepare the way for the Lord coming. He's there to do something in the big picture of what God wants to accomplish in the first century. That's the kid you're having. She, before this ever happened—and like most of her relatives thought, “I finally got my kid”—see, the blessing that God brings here, Elizabeth sees as something much bigger than that.

“Well,” they try to go over her head (verse 61): “None of your relatives is called by this name.” So they made signs to his father—“Hey, Zech, can you chime in on this? Well, you can't speak. Can you somehow communicate to us what we're supposed to call this kid?” Verse 63: “And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John.’” I'm assuming in big, bold letters—“His name is John.” And they all wondered. Zech and Liz finally have their kid, and they don't call the kid **Zechariah Jr.** That doesn't make any sense. They pick this weird name, John—“Yahweh is gracious; God is gracious.” I don't get that. What's going on? They all wondered.

Immediately his mouth was opened—**Zechariah**—after all that time there being disciplined by God; his tongue was loosed and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors—really put, you know, a harsh note in the rejoicing room. They're having a kid there and the circumcision, and now they're all—wow—this is bigger than **Zechariah** and Elizabeth. “And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, ‘What then will this child be?’ For the hand of the Lord was with him.”

Number four on your outline: just jot this down—utilize your blessings for Christ. Why? Because that's how Elizabeth saw her gift from God. Her gift from God, she recognized, was bigger than just fulfilling her desires. Her gift from God was to be utilized for something greater than just what she wanted. She realized that God did this for her so that that kid could do something for God. That was seeing the blessing that God brought as something instrumental to be used in the world for the kingdom of Christ.

Now, if I start saying that to you, you may say, “Well, not fair—that hermeneutic. I mean, this kid has clearly been called out by the angel Gabriel, and all that message came from God. He had a role to play. It was very specific. My kid's just a kid, man. I'm calling him Mike Jr. I don't care. I mean, he's for us.” Listen—here's a verse that will help you recognize the comparative, the connection, the similarity between you and Elizabeth's answered prayer: 2 Corinthians 5:15. I quote it all the time; you know it. But see the qualifications of this verse—it simply says this: “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and rose again.” Think that one through. He dies for us so that those who lived—you qualify—all the stuff that you get, all the stuff under your purview as a living person—it is all supposed to be used for him, living for him.



When God answers your prayer—you're sick, you got a diagnosis, the odds are not in your favor. God turns that around. You're now on your feet again and things are moving forward. What's that good health for? Why did God give you that? The Bible says this: all of your life is to be used for—what did I say?—even if you eat and drink, it's to be all for the glory of God. Right? You save that situation with your house—it doesn't get foreclosed on. You don't have to move into some small apartment. You get to keep that. What's your house for? "Well, it's for me and my family to enjoy it." No—it's much bigger than that. You and all that you have God gives so that we can live for him. That's the goal.

You have a kid that you've wanted—you've been struggling. Maybe you're in that, you know, 6% that's clinically infertile and God grants you that child—or you adopt, or whatever it might be for you—where God fulfills the desire of your heart to be a mom or a dad. What's that kid for? "That those who live should no longer live for themselves..." You want a drastic example of this—which is a head-scratcher? Hannah, another infertile gal in 1 Samuel 1. She prays for a kid. She gets the kid—she prayed earnestly for the kid. What does she do? It makes no sense—no one would understand this if you only think that the blessings of God are for you to enjoy. Oh, they are for you to enjoy. But she recognized after all of this, and when she has the kid, she calls him Samuel (which means "the Lord hears")—she gets it: I asked; God gave. She has the kid—what does she do? She brings him to the worship center, hands him off to a less-than-perfect priest named Eli after weaning the child, and she uses this phrase—here's how it reads in 1 Samuel chapter one: the bottom there is saying, "I prayed for this child; God has granted me the petition I asked of him. Therefore I have"—here's how the ESV translates—"I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord." And she worshiped there.

The gifts that we get from God—if he saves your marriage, fixes your finances, heals your body, takes you out of that season of difficulty, deprivation, loneliness—whatever it might be, fixes it—what's the fix for? To be parlayed in some way for the glory and good of God and the advancement of his kingdom.

I gotta do this—I know I have no time for it—but last passage: 2 Corinthians chapter one. Would you turn there—one last passage before you give up on me here this morning. 2 Corinthians chapter one.

Back to the blown-off appendage—sounds terrible. "You know what, Mike? That's great for something God can answer. But in my heart there are things that cannot be fixed. You talked about death. That seems pretty permanent. I mean, you talked earlier in the service about C. S. Lewis losing his wife Joy after four years of marriage—that's tragic. She dies of cancer. I mean, you're going to go to the gravestone; you're going to lay flowers on the grave. There's no fix for that now. There's no remedy for that in this life." I get it. And you'd say, "Well, point two helped us with that because there's something eternal, bigger than that all." Yeah, I guess I'll just suffer through the



rest of my life. There is something that God does even in the thing that is irreversible in this life that he does that can still be parlayed into being useful for the glory of God. Just this—then we'll close.

Look at 2 Corinthians chapter one, verse 3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all"—here's our key word—"comfort, who comforts us"—look at this tongue-twister now—"in all our afflictions, 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." Okay—did you unravel all that? God is a God of comfort. He comforts us (verse 4) in all of our afflictions so that, when we get that comfort and the overwhelming, crushing grief of that situation doesn't feel that way anymore, I can take that comfort that I receive and I can comfort those in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves have been comforted by God. Now, that is a way to parlay the kind of suffering that we have that looks like the situation is irreversible in this life—and perhaps it is: your kid dies, your wife dies, I get that, she's not coming back, your kid's not coming back—but God does something in your life, does he not? Even with folks with appendages blown off from the battlefield, there is something that happens—a rehabilitation that happens, a comfort and adaptation that happens—that when God accomplishes that in your life, God does that; and though you don't have your limb back, spiritually so to speak, and that situation may seem as permanent as anything can be in this life, the Bible says you can take what God does in your life to minister to you—to get you to be able to adapt to that situation—and that adaptation, that comfort, that help can be parlayed to start ministering to the body of Christ. And in that regard, you use it for Christ. That's the blessing of comfort, even when that situation can't be reversed.

Can you start to see your suffering that way? That even if it's permanent, God can take you, put you back on your feet, dust you off, allow you to make it in this life—with a productive life, with a life that is not overwhelmed and crushed by that pain—and that that strength and the way in which God brought you through that can be utilized to help a lot of people that feel like there is no hope. Utilize your blessings for Christ.

We'd all like a life without pain, wouldn't we? I'd vote for that. No pain. Let's outlaw pain. But we're stuck in a life with pain. I should say this, though, as a footnote: the life without pain is coming. It's on its way. God has promised that—no suffering, no pain, no tears. It's not pie in the sky. That all makes sense in light of the resurrection. I get that. I understand that based on what Christ accomplished and what he did. But in the meantime, we're gonna have a lot of pain.

The goal here, in looking at Elizabeth, is for us to be able to suffer hardship as a good soldier; to be able to see that part of the struggle of our lives really is going to be put in one of two places: debilitating, or something God uses as a stepping stone for something greater in our lives. If we can approach it with the right biblical perspective, we can get our struggles in the biblical context and see ourselves start to recognize that there's a lot of ministry God wants to do—not only through your pains, but the times that he brings comfort or reverses the situation and answers your prayer. God can utilize both of those for the glory of Christ and the good of others.



Let's pray together.

God, I hope that this message in no way would be misunderstood to think that our pain is not profound and serious at times. And I know there are some people in this room right now I'm sure that are struggling with things that seem absolutely overwhelming. They're despairing as Paul went on to say we didn't have time to look at it. There in Second Corinthians one despairing even of life.

But God I pray there would be no people that give up on life here. Especially because God is holding out to us the hope to not only have a relationship with him where he promises to hold our hand, to take us through this as we commune with God through even the deepest darkest trial is the song have said, David said it's so well even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil because you're with us.

Can we recognize God that even in the worst and most crushing difficult situations, that not only do you promise to sustain us, but you can give us a sense that all of this is part of the building block the purposeful pain, the working together for good for something on the other side. And for those in this room where the end of the tunnel light seems really hard to decipher, and they can't really get it. And it seems like it will never end give them hope even now.

And God allow us to not begin to build our theology based on our emotions or our hurt out to build our theology based on what the world says it's only focused on the game here now and never sees beyond the game. Help us to build our perspective from the Word of God. To understand that you're much bigger than the things that we see. And you've got to plan for us that goes far beyond even things in our lives that seem irreversible.

Give us hope, biblical hope, biblical optimism, that kind of tenacity and strength to capitalize on the difficulty because we understand its purpose. I pray that today would have helped as we've studied your word here in Luke chapter one in Jesus name I pray, amen.